



# **Telling Tales**

## Children's Literature in India

*Edited by*  
**AMIT DASGUPTA**

**INDIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS**  
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*Dedicated  
in memory  
of our childhood,  
long lost, but  
hopefully,  
not forgotten.*





## Foreword

Children all over the world enjoy a tale well-told. How many times have all of us been the target of this universal request from a child: 'Tell me a story!'

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations is delighted to be able to bring out this book on children's literature in India, which represents the considerable work that has been done on this subject in our country.

We do hope our readers will enjoy going through this book, and we invite them to send us their comments on this as well as our other publications.



(Shiv Shankar Mukherjee)

*Director General*

*Indian Council for Cultural Relations*

New Delhi  
March 7, 1995



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# 1

## Once Upon A Time

Amit Dasgupta

Years ago I read *The Little Prince*. It has been my constant companion ever since. I never understood then, nor do I know now, as to whether it is a book for children, or for adults or for those of us who have not forgotten that we were once children. I am told that writing for children is quite different from writing for adults. Yet there is universal appeal in *The Tales from the Panchatantra*, *The Little Prince*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *Aesop's Fables* and *Alice in Wonderland*. Young and old alike enjoy them and the enjoyment cuts across barriers of language and culture.

The perfect recipe for a children's story is hard to put down. The *Panchatantra* tales, for instance, invariably have a moral. They teach values. For instance, Don't Cut off Your Nose to Spite Your Face (*The Frog King and the Snake*), Nothing is Impossible for the Clever (*The Lion and the Hare*), Blind Imitation is a Dangerous Thing (*The Greedy Barber*) are some of the *Panchatantra* stories. Told in simple style and in a vocabulary children can understand, each story suggests societal norms and mores. They lay the basis for 'good' citizens. Values help us to become members of society and socialisation is the process by which we *become* members of society. The biography of the individual, from the moment of his birth, is the story of his relation with others (Berger, Peter L. and Brigitte: *Sociology : A Biographical Approach*). Almost every aspect of a child's world involves other human beings. Indeed, whether it is discomfort that the child feels

or a sense of satisfaction is directly correlated with an act of omission on the part of someone or an action to assuage a need.

Initially, the child has a micro-world which he deals with, totally oblivious of the macro-world which indeed influences and shapes the micro-world. Some persons in the micro-world are naturally more important for the child than others. Margaret Mead (*Childhood in Contemporary Society*) calls these special persons, *the significant others*. As time passes and the child starts interacting with the macro-world and realises the limitations the micro-world had imposed upon him in terms of alternatives available and choices that can be made, the process of socialisation begins and *the significant other* is gradually substituted by *the generalised other*. Socialisation is thus, the process by which the child is helped to link his micro-world with the macro-world.

Values are therefore an integral part of the socialisation process. One user-friendly manner in which values are disseminated and inculcated in the young is through children's literature. Every story in *The Panchatantra Tales* communicated therefore a way of seeing and interacting with the outside world. It helped the child assimilate the societal norms and the acceptable code of conduct and behaviour.

One of my favourite stories from the *Panchatantra* is *The Brahman and the Goat*.

One day a Brahman was returning home after having met a villager. The villager was so moved that the Brahman had visited him that he gifted him his favourite goat. The happy Brahman slung the goat over his shoulders and trudged home. "What a fine man, this villager is", the Brahman thought.

As he was walking through the forest, three thieves saw the Brahman. Now there's a fine goat, they thought. What an excellent meal it would make. But, how would one steal the goat from the Brahman, *that* was the problem. The thieves thought of a plan.

The first thief walked up to the Brahman and greeted him profusely and then said, "O Holy One, why are you carrying a dog on your shoulders?" The Brahman was rightly indignant, "Dog?" he asked, "What dog? You fool, can you not see this is a goat, and a fine goat at that?" "Suit yourself", said the thief and left

chuckling. "Calls a dog a goat" the Brahman could hear him laughing.

After a while, the Brahman met the second thief who reproached him for carrying a dead calf on his shoulders. "What will people say", asked the thief. "Think of your status in society". The Brahman became very angry and called the thief all manner of names. "You must be blind if you cannot distinguish a goat from a dead calf", he said.

But now the Brahman was also beginning to have some doubts. Could it be that he was not carrying a goat after all. Perhaps the villager had fooled him. His generosity was totally uncalled for. He must have had some mischievous motive in mind. The Brahman kept muttering to himself as he carried the goat on his shoulders.

And he chanced upon the third thief. The third thief rolled on the ground unable to contain his laughter. The puzzled Brahman asked him why he was laughing and what was so funny. The thief spluttered as he pointed to the Brahman and said, "What have we come to? People ride on the back of donkeys and here the donkey is riding on the back of a Brahman". This time the Brahman did not hesitate. He threw the goat on the ground and ran as fast as his legs would carry him. "A monster", he muttered to himself, "a monster it was that the villager gave to me. It changed itself from goat to dog to dead calf to donkey in a matter of a few minutes."

The thieves laughed a lot as they had a good dinner.

The story is meant to highlight that we should trust our own judgement first and not get swayed by what other people say. As a story it is not culture specific. Replace the word 'Brahman' by any other and the story would be understood by children from any part of the world. This ability of universal appeal that children's stories have is truly remarkable. As an example, let me tell you a charming Russian story called *Snegorotcka*.

Years, many, many years ago, in Russia, there lived a couple who longed to have a child. The years passed, but no child was born to the couple. With every passing wintry day, their longing grew as



they watched children play in the snow. "If only one of those children could be ours", they thought.

One day the old couple, walking through the snow, decided to join the children who were making a huge snowman. "Let us make a snowchild," said the old man to his wife. What a lovely snowchild it was, that they made. Small, with a tiny nose and mouth and eyes and ears. And as they watched, the snowchild's eyes suddenly blinked. The old lady could not believe her eyes. Was the snow playing tricks? Slowly, in front of their eyes, the snowchild turned into a lovely baby girl.

The old couple could not believe their good luck. The wife held the child close to her breast and her eyes filled with tears as the child called her Mother. "We will call you Snegorotcka", said the old man, "Snegorotcka the Snowflake. For you were made of snow."

Snowflake grew quickly. She taught the other children games in the snow and how to make beautiful snow castles and snow animals. She seemed so totally at ease with snow and the bitter Russian winter.

But the snow began to melt with the warmth of spring. The first flowers emerged from their long hibernation and the birds began to sing. Snowflake retreated, as it were, into her shell. Her eyes began to lose their sparkle and she stopped smiling. There was something so terribly sad and forlorn about her now.

One day there was shaft of sunlight that came in through the window and, as it touched Snowflake, she screamed in pain. The old couple held her close and kissed her. "What is it my child," the old lady asked. But Snegorotcka would not answer for she knew that her time was up. The old couple spoke to her of spring and the burst of colours and warmth it would bring. "Come," said the old man, "Come, my dear child. Let us see the cherry blossoms."

As they walked through the fields where the snow was gently melting, a shaft of sunlight struck the little child. She cried out once, grew smaller and smaller and smaller, until all that remained was a patch of wet grass and a lovely white flower where she had stood. She who was made of snow and nourished by winter, died in the warmth of spring and sunshine.

I am not sure that this story has a moral. We can of course, quite easily, make one up. In any case, the pertinent point is that it is not obligatory for all children's stories to have a moral. Stories can stand on their own.

What you do need is a good storyteller. So many of us have gone to sleep hearing stories from our parents. They created a world of fantasy and of magic, they spun mysterious webs around us as they told us of days long gone by and heroes who fought great battles where the good always triumphed and the wicked died a cruel and deserving death. All we needed to hear were the magic words, "Once upon a time, in a land far, far away" and a sense of excitement filled us.

This issue contains articles on various aspects of children's literature in India today. It has been written by acknowledged 'experts' in the field and I am grateful to them all for having agreed so readily to contribute an article. It does not regrettably have any article from children. That is a weakness which I apologise for. Rarely do we sit and ask what children feel about what the adults write for them. Perhaps, the lasting interest in some of the brilliant books written for children reflects how some adults are in fact able to talk to children in their language. And, talk to some adults as well!

A book on children's literature in India is useful, I believe, to reach out to others interested in the subject. Often we erect artificial barriers and this only promotes ignorance and misunderstandings. The essence of progress is dialogue and a sense of dependent development. To borrow, to assimilate, to share, can never be a burden or a stigma. There can be no sense of loss if a Norwegian child were to enjoy *The Panchatantra Tales* or a child in a village in Bengal were to read *Alice in Wonderland*. But this access is very often denied principally because there are very few translations available and also because there is no proper documentation of the considerable work each country is doing in the field. This book, it is hoped, would partially respond to this gap at least insofar as children's literature in India is concerned.

I would be failing in my duty if I did not mention how the idea to bring out this book first arose. Shri Vasant Sathe, the President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations felt that the essence of a viable

policy of cultural diplomacy must lie in systematic people-to-people contact and dialogue. Cultural exchanges and interface can be hollow and short-lived if it does not contribute to a deeper understanding, fraternity and fellowship at the level of people. Common people. People like you and me. Families. Homes. What Shri Sathe had in mind was a broad-based spread. Something that touched children and affected their macro-world and became part of the process of socialisation. When that happened it could help foster a sustainable sense of tolerance and an acceptance of the other. In order to do this, it is necessary to project various aspects of India to help create greater awareness. This book is part of that effort. It attempts to throw light on an area which has hitherto received little, if any, publicity.

# 2

## Telling Tales\*

A. K. Ramanujan

Even in the most urbane and Westernized Indian households there exists, behind the prim exterior, another India. It lives in tales of passion and trouble, told to children by their grandmothers and servants as the dusk descends. Related in languages from Tamil to Kannada, the stories turn the diurnal hierarchy on its head: their heroes are beggars who are really gods and princesses forced to labour as servants. Consciousness gives way; the unconscious surfaces. The disciplines of the father tongues—the classical Sanskrit, the official and universal English—are imposed later in childhood, but the Indian psyche is first swathed in the mother languages' secret folds.

As Indian voices are a central concern of this *Daedalus* issue, I've chosen to speak of certain childhood voices—in tales heard from our grandmothers, aunts, and cooks in the kitchen—and about how I hear them now. Since my childhood, I have done what may be called fieldwork among other people's grandmothers and other domestic tellers of tales in Kannada villages and towns. Indeed, many of the tales I shall relate here are samples from my collections, and from those of my fellow folklorists, made over the last two decades in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. So I hope you will hear two voices—

\*Reproduced from *Indian Horizons*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1992.

mine and enclosed in it the voices of domestic tellers of tales, mostly women's (in my translation). One can say a great deal about these tales, but I have written about them elsewhere and my space here is limited. I shall therefore present some tales and suggest what sorts of things they may represent to someone like me who, like many other Indians, is blessed and handicapped by at least three language traditions—Sanskrit, a mother tongue, and English.

When say “childhood voices”, I refer not only to my own childhood but also to that of myriad others like me and also to children today in Indian villages. The tales I am talking about are ancient but current. Even in the most anglicized Hindu families or in large cities like Bombay and Calcutta, oral tales are only a grandmother away, a cousin away, a train ride away, and mostly no further away than the kitchen. I hear that the nets of television will soon cover 90 per cent of the Indian population: I don't know if that will kill the folk narratives or adapt them or help disseminate them further. We will bracket that anxiety for now.

### *Tales in Childhood*

The only fairy tales we *read* in our early years were Grimms' and Andersen's, in English (as soon as we knew how to read it), among other things in a many-volume encyclopaedia called *The Book of Knowledge* that was in our father's library. We never told these stories to one another. We never connected these tales with the ones we heard downstairs from our grandmother or our cooks in the kitchen.

The stories we heard downstairs were in Tamil (or in friends' houses, in Kannada); they were oral, told by a grandmother, an aunt, or a cook, never by Mother. Authority figures did not tell these stories, at least not in our family.<sup>1</sup> My mother told me folktales only when she had lost her authority over me, when I was in my twenties and I was interested in learning about them. Furthermore, there were taboos against telling them during the broad daylight. They were told at dusk while we were eating, for South Indian stories tend to be mealtime rather than bedtime stories. Associated with relaxed loving figures, with sleep and food, the tales were formative influences and hypnotic. We were trying hard to keep our eyes open by the time we came to the end of the story and the meal, which were

timed to coincide. The prince was married, the slandered bride reinstated, and the wicked stepmother thrown into the lime kiln, just when the morsel in the sleepy hand was the very last one. The tales in the English books had names like Cinderella, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, but grandmother's had no names at all. The characters were people like a poor Brahmin and his scold of a wife, or two sisters, one kind and one unkind, who were daughters born to a dog that lived under the palace balcony, or clever daughters-in-law who terrorized even the goddess with their farts or outwitted their cruel but stupid mothers-in-law. Our grandmothers, who had been both, always seemed to identify with the clever daughters-in-law.

Our very literate father never told us stories like these, though he too knew them and had heard them in his childhood. But if he talked to us at all, he talked about astronomy, astrology, Euclid, often the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gita* or poetry, or Chaucer and Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Dumas, or anything he happened to be reading. My father once told the whole story of *Macbeth* to my mother in the kitchen, in Tamil, with all of us listening in. It was a rare occasion and we knew it. As we grew up, Sanskrit and English were our father tongues, and Tamil and Kannada our mother tongues. The father tongues distanced us from our mothers, from our own childhoods, and from our villages and many of our neighbours in the cowherd colony next door. And the mother tongues united us with them. It now seems quite appropriate that our house had three levels; a downstairs for the Tamil world, an upstairs for the English and the Sanskrit, and a terrace on top that was open to the sky where our father could show us the stars and tell us their English and Sanskrit names. From up there on the terrace, we could also look down on the cowherd colony, and run down noisily and breathlessly for a closer look if we saw the beginnings of a festival, a wedding, or a "hair to hair" fight between two women (with the choicest obscenities pouring from them), or a magnificent *vilayti*, of foreign bull, brought specially to service the local cows.

We ran up and down all these levels. Sanskrit, English, and Tamil and Kannada (my two childhood languages, literally my mother's tongues, since she too had become bilingual in our childhood) stood for three different interconnected worlds. Sanskrit stood for the

Indian past; English for colonial India and the West, which also served as a disruptive creative other than both alienated us from and revealed us (in its terms) to ourselves; and the mother tongues, the most comfortable, and least conscious of all, for the world of women, playmates, children, and servants. Ideas, tales, significant alliances, conflicts, elders, and peers were reflected in each of these languages. Each had a literature that was unlike the others'. Each was another to the others, and it became the business of a lifetime for some of us to keep the dialogues and quarrels alive among these three and to make something of them. Our writers, thinkers, and men of action—say, Gandhi, Tagore, and Bharati—made creative use of these triangulations, these dialogues and quarrels. For those of us who were shaped in that “triple stream”, our translations, poems, lives in and out of India, searches (which we often disguised as research, analysis, even psychoanalysis), and all such explorations, including essays such as these, are witnesses to this lifelong enterprises. Though I shall use the first person singular often in this essay, I believe that neither the things I am talking about nor most of the recognitions are peculiarly mine.

### *Women's Oral Tales*

What follows is an oral tale—*The Dead Prince and the Talking Doll*—a typical favourite:

The king had a daughter. One daughter, but no sons. Now and then a beggar would come to the palace. He was strange, for every time he begged, he would say, “You’ll get a dead man for a husband. Give me some alms.” The girl used to wonder: “Why does he say such weird things to me?” And she would silently give him alms and go in. The holy man (*bava*), this beggar man, came to the door every day for twelve years. And he said every day, “You’ll get a dead man for a husband.”

One day the king was standing in the balcony and heard him say, “You’ll get a dead man for a husband. Give me some alms.” The king came down and asked his daughter, “What’s this talk, daughter?”

She replied, “This *bava* comes every day and says, ‘You’ll get a

dead man for a husband. Give me some alms.' Then I give him something. He has been saying it for twelve years, ever since I was a little girl."

The king was disturbed when he heard this. He was afraid the prophecy would come true. He didn't wish his only daughter to have a dead man for a husband. He said, unhappily, "It's no good staying in this kingdom. Let's leave and spend our time in travels." And he got his servants to pack everything and left the palace with his entire family.

Around that time the prince of the neighbouring kingdom fell mysteriously ill and died. But his body looked as if he had only fallen asleep. Astrologers said he would return to life after twelve years, so they didn't bury him. Instead, his father, the king, built a bungalow outside the town, laid his son's body in it, mortared and whitewashed the house on all sides, and left the body there, fully clothed and adorned. The father locked the main door and on it left a written message saying: "One day a chaste woman who has made offerings to the gods for her husband will come here. Only she can enter the place. When she touches the door, it will open. It will open to no one else."

It was soon after this sad event that the first king arrived there with his wife and daughter and his entourage. They were all hungry and began to cook a meal for themselves. The king's daughter went for a walk and saw the locked door. The lock was of exquisite design and gleamed from a distance.

She went near and held it in her hand. As soon as she touched it, it sprang open and the door opened. She went in. The door closed and locked itself behind her. Ahead of her were eleven more doors, one behind another. They all opened at her touch, and each closed behind her as she went through them.

Right in the heart of the house she found a man on a cot who looked as if he were dead or fast asleep. Before she could wonder about what was happening to her, how doors opened before her and shut behind her, she was in his presence.

His family had left provision for twelve years in the house: vessels, dishes, clothes, grains, spices. The princess saw all these things around her.



She remembered the holy beggar's words and thought, "I didn't escape it: his words are coming true." She unveiled the face of the body. It was as dead as dead could be but as calm as a face in deep slumber. "Well, what's to be done ? It looks as if I am imprisoned here with this dead man. Let's do something", she said, and started massaging his legs.

Meanwhile, in the forest, the mother had said, "The food is all ready. Where's our girl ?" Her father had walked outside and called her. She was nowhere to be seen. But they could hear her cries from inside the house. They called out, "Daughter, why are you in there ? Come out !"

She answered from within and told her father what had happened.

"I touched the locks, and they fell open. As soon as I came in, they locked themselves shut. I am alone here."

"What is in there ?"

"A dead man is lying here. Nothing else."

"My girl, your luck has caught up with you. What the *bava* said is coming true. The locks can't be opened."

They tried to enter the house from the sides and from behind, but it was as if it was sealed. They tried and tried and finally said, "What else can we do ? We'll go and leave you to work out your fate." They left sorrowfully. Time passed, and they grew old.

For almost twelve years she tended and massaged his body. She would wake up in the morning in the locked house with twelve locked doors, and where could she go ? She bathed and cooked, kept the house and looked after the dead body, and thought about all the things that had happened to her.

Inside the locked house, night and day the princess massaged the dead man's legs, took ritual baths, worshipped the gods at the right times, and made offerings for her prince. Around the tenth year, an acrobat's daughter came that way. She looked around the house, tried the doors, and at last climbed onto the roof.

The princess was lonely. She was dying to see another human face. "If there's a chink in the house, I could pull in at least a child. If only I could have a girl for a companion," she thought. Just then, she saw a young woman looking through a window.

"Hey, girl ! Will you come inside?"

"Yes", said the acrobat girl.

"Do you have any father or mother? If you do, don't try to come in. You can't get out. If you don't have parents, come inside."

"Oh no, I' ve nobody."

She pulled the girl in through the window. The acrobat girl was agile. She twisted and contorted her body and got in. The princess was happy; she had company now. With a companion inside, time went fast. Two more years rolled by.

The prince's twelve years were coming to an end. The time for his life to stir again was near.

One day, when the king's daughter was taking her bath, she heard the omen bird speak from the branch in the window. It said, "The twelve years are coming to an end. If someone will pluck the leaves of this tree, grind them and press them in a silver cup, and pour the juice into the man's mouth, he will come to life again."

The king's daughter heard it. At once she plucked some leaves, pressed the juice out into a silver cup. Just when she was about to put it to the dead man's lips, it occurred to her that she had not bathed yet. She would finish her bath, purify herself, offer worship to the Lord Shiva properly, and then give the juice to the prince. So she put down the cup and went to bathe and offer worship.

The acrobat girl asked her, "What's this stuff in the cup ? Why is it here?"

The princess told her about the bird's message and what the cup contained. As soon as she heard all this, the acrobat girl thought this was her chance. While the princess sat in worship, the acrobat girl parted the dead prince's lips and poured the juice from the silver cup. As the liquid went in, he woke up as if he had only been asleep. Exclaiming, "Shiva, Shiva!" he sat up straight. He saw the woman next to him and asked, "Who are you ?"

She said, "Your wife."

He was grateful to her. They had become husband and wife while the princess, the woman who had served him for twelve long years, sat inside, long absorbed in prayer.

When she came out, she heard the two of them whispering

intimacies to each other and thought, "O Shiva, I did penance for twelve years, and it turned out like this. Obviously, happiness is not my lot." She began to work as their servant, while the prince and the acrobat girl sat back and enjoyed themselves.

Yet, after all, she was a princess, born to be a queen. The other girl was only an acrobat's daughter. The prince began to see the difference between them in manners and speech. He began to suspect something was wrong. So later that day, he said to both of them, "I'm going out for a hunt, and then I'll go to the city. Tell me what you would like."

The acrobat girl, who had been longing for her kind of gypsy food, asked for all sorts of greens and some dry flat bread. He was disgusted. A woman should ask for saris and silk and blouses, but this one asks for wretched dry bread! Then he told the acrobat girl to ask the other woman in the house what she would like. The princess answered, "I don't want anything much. Just tell the master what I'd really like is a talking doll."

"This one is strange too. All she wants is a talking doll", he thought.

After a good hunt in the jungle, he brought the acrobat girl the evil-smelling greens and leaves and dry bread from some gypsies, and for the princess a talking doll. The acrobat girl was overjoyed at the sight of the rough food; now she began to thrive and get colour in her cheeks.

That night, after everyone had eaten and gone to bed, the talking doll suddenly began to speak and said, "Tell me a story."

The princess answered, "What story can I tell you? My own life has become quite a story."

"Then tell me your life's story," insisted the doll.

So the princess told the doll her entire story, as I've told you so far. Just like that.

The doll nodded and said, "Hmm, hmm," as the princess told her tale. The prince, lying awake in the other room, heard it all. Finally she said, "I left the silver cup there, on that ledge, and that woman gave the juice to the prince before I got back from my prayers. Now she's the wife and I'm the servant. That's the way it turned out." And she ended the story.

As he heard the story from where he lay in the next room, the prince felt his anger mounting. When the story came to an end, he took a switch and lashed at the acrobat girl sleeping next to him, and drove her out of the house.

"You're not my wife, you're an acrobat wench! Get out of my sight!" he screamed.

Then he went in and consoled the princess who had served him lovingly for twelve years; and they talked to each other all night happily.

In the world outside, his father and mother had counted up the days and years. They knew twelve years were over and were anxious to see what had happened to their son. They came, and all the town with them. They found the doors unlocked and in the heart of the house the couple, prince and princess, whispering loving words to each other.

Gratefully, the father-in-law and the mother-in-law fell at the feet of their young daughter-in-law and said, "By your good work of many past lives and your prayers in this one, our son came back to life. He looks as fresh as if he has just woken up from a long night's sleep. It's all your doing."

They took the young couple to their palace, and celebrated the wedding with great pomp and many processions. For the grand occasion, they sent for the bride's parents, who had grown weak and old. Their eyes had become like cotton-seed, and they were ready to lie down in the earth. But their spirits revived at the good news, and they too hurried to the reunion at their daughter's wedding.

That is what I would call a woman-centred tale. Such tales share special characteristics. While tales that feature princes who go off on quests for the golden bird in the emerald tree invariably end in wedding bells, tales with women at the centre of action almost never do so. The women meet their husbands and are married formally or informally in the first part of the tale, often at the very beginning, and then the real story, usually nothing but trouble, begins. In this matter, they are unlike European tales of the Cinderella or Snow White type, which always conclude the action with marriage.

A characteristic pattern of the Kannada women-centred tales begins with a first union, often a marriage, followed by a separation, and ends with a reunion, a firmer bonding between the woman and her spouse. In several of these tales, the middle part features the death of the husband, separation of the most drastic kind, as in this one (and in the classical tale of Savitri), and in the later part of the tale the wife restores him to life. In the story of the dead prince, the separation reaches its worst phase, the maiden's twelve years of waiting and suffering, when she acrobat woman suddenly usurps her place and becomes her husband's lover. Among other things, it expresses, I think, an upper-class woman's fear, the rivalry of a supposedly more vigorous, cunning lower-class woman.

For the prince on his quest, a kingdom and a bride are the prizes he wins after his adventures and hardships—that's his initiatory scenario. But in the women-centred tales, as in the classical analogues of Shakuntala and Savitri, it doesn't seem enough for a woman to be married. She has to earn her husband, her married state, through a rite of passage, a period of unmerited suffering.

In all such stories, there is no *karma*, no act of good or evil in a past life that motivates the present and rationalizes misfortunes, as there is in the epics. Though *karma* may be mentioned in passing, the concept is not part of this world-view. Actually, no reason is given for the wife's misfortunes or for the prince's twelve-year period of deathlike hibernation. Sometimes it is a curse or a prophecy, entirely unearned, unconnected to character. In a classical text like the *Mahabharata*, every action is motivated by the actor's previous actions. The chain of cause and consequence is unrelenting.

Not that our storytellers did not know about *karma*. Whenever Mother was angry with one of us, she (and all her fellow mothers, and all their mothers) scolded us with phrases like "You are my *karma*, my *prarabdha* (accumulated bad deeds), come now to torment me in this life." Such terms of abuse as well as the Sanskrit epics were full of the concept of *karma* and its consequences. One had to be careful to do good deeds and accumulate *punya*, or merit, and avoid bad ones, which would heap up *papa*, or sin (for want of a better word), with evil consequences in our divine account. We also believed when we were children that if anybody was thirsty and

needed water, we shouldn't refuse it. If we did, we would surely be born as lizards in the next birth. But in the stories grandmother told us, there was rarely any mention of *karma* or rebirth. They usually felt confined to a single life span and seemed to work on a theory of action rather different from *karma*.

Donald Davidson and other philosophers speak of the difference between actions and events.<sup>2</sup> I find the distinction useful here. Actions have actors; actions express actors. Actions have reasons; actors are responsible for what they do, and character is destiny. But events happen to people. Events have no reasons, only causes.

Narratives motivated by *karma* convert all events into actions; in them everything has a reason, as in the *Mahabharata*. But there is much in human reality that is not controlled by human beings—accident, social and economic institutions, nature itself, especially nature in its most intimate human form, one's own and others' bodies. The uncontrollable part of nature cannot be rationalized, especially in the moments of crisis. It can only be accepted or watched, laughed at or sidestepped and bypassed by human ingenuity. In these oral tales, this reality is not reasoned away but faced. Here actions, human actions, are seen as events. They have causes, no reasons. By enduring them and watching for a moment of change that is the apt moment for action, and acting then, usually speaking out, telling one's own story, one comes through. That's why many of these tales end with the heroine telling her own story to "a significant other" (often through a device, like a talking doll or a lamp), resolving the crisis, ending her separation, reuniting with her husband and her kin. The tale then becomes her story. Till then she has no story to tell. The whole tale is the tale of her acquiring her story, making a person of her, making a silent woman a speaking person.

### *Stories about Stories*

The power of such tales may be why it is crucial that stories should be told and why there are stories about not telling stories and about why they should be told.

Here is one such story about stories:

A poor widow was living with her two sons and two daughters-in-law. All four of them scolded and ill-treated her all day. She had no one to whom she could turn and tell her woes. As she kept her tales of woe to herself, she grew fatter and fatter. Her sons and daughters-in-law mocked at her growing fatter by the day and asked her to eat less.

One day, she wandered away from home in sheer misery and found herself in a deserted old house outside town. She couldn't bear to keep her miseries to herself any longer. She told all her tales of grievance against her first son to the wall in front of her. As she finished, the wall collapsed under the weight of her woes and crashed to the ground in a heap. Her body grew lighter as well.

Then she turned to the next wall and told it all her grievances against her first son's wife. And down came that wall, and she grew lighter still. She brought down the next wall with her tales against her second son, and the remaining fourth wall too with her complaints against her second daughter-in-law.

Standing in the ruins, with bricks and rubble all around her, she felt lighter in mood and lighter in body. She looked at herself and found she had actually lost all the weight she had gained in her wretchedness.

Then she went home.

This tale begins with a woman beleaguered and enclosed, and ends with her in the open, all her four walls demolished. The old woman tells her stories, her family secrets, only to lighten herself, not to enlighten anyone else. Nothing is said about her cruel family being converted, becoming kinder; only she has changed, unburdened of her sorrows.

In our classical literature, too, storytelling is a form of performance. Stories are not merely utterances; they are part of the action. They change its course, but they affect the addressee. In this tale, the tales of woe are told to express and affect the speaker's own mood, to change the speaker's state of being. Telling the story is cathartic for the teller of the tale. Such a notion of catharsis is not part of the Indian classical aesthetics. Note also how emotions have weight—the characters are literally, not metaphorically, “burdened”, “heavy-” or

“light-hearted”. Tales and dreams take metaphors literally. Such literalization is not merely a literary device. It implies the sense that emotions and thoughts are substances. Material and non-material things are part of a continuum of *sthula* and *sukshma*, “gross” and “subtle” substance allowing transformations. One substance may become the other.

In another tale, a barber discovers, while he is shaving the king, that the king has a donkey’s ears:

The king orders the barber never to tell anyone about them on pain of death. So he keeps the secret, but the more he keeps it to himself the fatter he grows. His wife is alarmed and, after much trying, wheedles, the secret out of him.

At once she begins to grow round, looking more and more pregnant, till one day, unable to bear the burden any longer, she digs a hole in the ground and tells her secret to the hole and covers it up.

Out of the buried secret springs a tree. One day, the palace drummer breaks a branch off the tree and makes some drumsticks. When he beats his drum in the palace assembly, the drum says, “*Dum dum dum*, king, *dum dum*, has the ears, *dum dum*, of a donkey, *dum dum*. The king has the ears, *dum dum*, of a donkey, *dum dum*!”

Nothing is lost, only transformed.

Stories and words have not only weight; they also have wills and rages, and they can take different shapes, as in the following example, *The Tales’ Revenge*:

A rich man from Mysore has a son. Another, from Kanara, has a daughter. The men are travelling and meet on the way. When they find out about the son and the daughter, they begin to talk about a marriage alliance between them. While doing so, night comes on. They eat together, and as they are falling asleep, the Kanara man asks the other to tell him a story. The other man knows many stories but will not tell him any and goes to sleep.

While the Kanara man lies awake, he hears voices as in a dream.



One says, "This man won't tell or teach a story to anyone. We are choking in his belly. When he walks under the banyan tree, I'll fell a branch and kill him." Another says, "If he escapes that, I'll crush him when he walks through the narrow passage between two rocks." The third one says, "I'll wait in his plate of rice as a fish hook and get him when he eats." The fourth says, "If he survives all of you, I'll become a snake and kill him."

In the morning, they resume their journey. The Kanara man reopens his marriage negotiations. They agree on dowries, gifts, and other such things. "Then let's go see the young man. We can fix the wedding date as soon as we have done that," says the girl's father. And he adds, "You know how it is these days, we've been looking and looking for a bridegroom. Nothing fits. Sometimes even the hands seem too short." The Mysore man adds, "That's right. If it's not the hand, it's the leg that falls short," and invites the Kanara man to visit his house nearby. The other says, "I'll walk with you on one condition. You must do as I say for the next couple of days." The Mysore man finds the request odd but agrees, thinking, "These chaps from Kanara are a bit strange anyway." They start walking.

On their way, they come to a banyan tree. "Look here", says the Kanara man suddenly, "Let's not go under the banyan tree," and he guides the Mysore man away from it. No sooner have they passed it, when down comes a big branch. "It was lucky we were not walking under it," says the Mysore man, but the other says nothing. Then they come to a place where they have to pass between two rocks. The Kanara man leads the other man away from it and goes around the rocks, when suddenly a boulder comes rolling down into the passage. "Lucky we were not there," says the Mysore man.

When they reach his house, the Mysore man prepares a big meal, and they sit down to eat. As soon as he begins to eat his rice, the Kanara man asks that all the rice be given to him. He quickly snatches the other's plateful of rice and overturns it. The host is surprised and offended at his guest's strange behaviour, but they move on to other kinds of food. When they've finished eating, the Kanara man asks, "Shall we see the young man now?" But the

young man's mother says, "He isn't around. He has gone to his uncle's place." He is really inside, but they don't want him to be interviewed, that's all.

It's night. So they make beds and offer one to the guest. But the Kanara man insists on sleeping in the same room as his host and his wife. "How can you do that? We'll give you a bed in another room", says the shocked host. But the Kanara man insists on sleeping in the same room, and does.

He stays awake. While the host and his wife are fast asleep on their cot, a snake comes slithering in toward them. The wide-awake Kanara man pulls out a knife and cuts it down just as it is climbing the legs of the cot. Its blood spatters on the cheeks of the host's wife and, fearful lest it be poisonous, the Kanara man quickly wipes it off her cheek with his dhoti. She wakes up startled, finds this strange man touching her, and screams. Her husband wakes up and is about to attack when the guest restrains him. Before it gets worse, the Kanara man speaks out : "You may wonder why I have this knife in my hand, and why I touched your wife. I'm not after your wife. Just look under the cot." And he shows them the pieces of dead snake.

He also tells the bewildered Mysore man the whole story about the tales that had vowed revenge for not being told, and how he had saved his host from the banyan branch, the rocks, the fish hooks in the rice, and now the snake. He pulls out from his pocket the previous day's rice in his handkerchief, and shows him the fish hooks. "That's why I told I'd come with you only if you would do as I asked you to. You can now see why." The Mysore man wonders aloud, "Why is it I have kept all the stories to myself?"

Then they return to the wedding talks, and in a few days the wedding takes place.

But the wedding guests gossip and whisper to each other, "Ayyayyo, look, the bride has one hand shorter than the other. And the bridegroom has half a leg!"

When the groom's father says to the bride's father, "How can you do this to me?" The other says, "But I told you, these days, everything is short, even hands!" The groom's father says, "But I told you, not only hands, even legs sometimes fall short!"

In this tale, stories have a special function. The two fathers both have something to conceal from each other—a daughter with a short hand and a son with half a leg. One of them asks for a story, and the other refuses to tell him one. There seems to be a suggestion that a secretive man tells no tales. In another tale, a clever woman finds a thief by letting them respond to a story she tells. To tell a story is to discover or reveal a secret.

And such stories also tell you why tales have to be told. They have an existence of their own, a secondary objectivity, like other cultural artifacts. They are part of what the philosopher Karl Popper calls the Third World, or World 3: neither subject nor object, construction of both but a third realm that depends on and enters into the construction of both subjects and objects.<sup>3</sup> It is in this sense perhaps that “myths speak man, rather than man speaking them,” as Levi-Strauss would say. They are there before any particular teller tells them; they hate it when they are not passed on to others, for they can come into being again and again only in that act of translation. If you know a tale, you owe it not only to others, but to the tale, to tell it; otherwise, it suffocates. Like chain letters, traditions have to be kept in good repair, transmitted, or else beware, such tales seem to say, things will happen to you. You can’t hoard them.

In another story told all over South India, a son can’t understand why his poor mother gives away half the food she earns each day:

The mother says that she is, after all, an ignorant old woman, that only Shiva knows the answer to such questions. So the son sets out to find Shiva and to ask him the question about giving away food. On the way the son meets a king who has built a tank, but it is dry; a snake who is stuck in a hole, unable to move in or out; a tree that is unable to produce any fruit; and a man whose legs are crippled by paralysis. As the son meets each of these people, each one tells him to ask Shiva for the cause of his special problem and a cure for it.

When the boy finds Shiva, he is chewing betelnut with Parvati after a hearty meal and tells the boy that each of them has been keeping something to himself—the king has a grown-up daughter whom he has not given away in marriage, the snake has a jewel

in its hood he must give away, the paralytic has all sorts of knowledge he is hoarding, and the tree is hiding a treasure in its roots.

As you can guess, they are eager to give the young man the jewel, the learning, the treasure, and the princess—all, of course, thanks to his mother's *punya*, merit gathered by her daily gifts of food, with which the tale begins.

Daughters, wealth, knowledge, and food must circulate. These are *danas*, or gifts, that, in accordance with their nature, must be given away. Stories are no different. Communities and generations depend on such exchanges and transfers.

These notions are not confined to grandmothers, peasants, and unlettered types in the culture. In a largely non-literate culture, persons of every kind and from every level have vast non-literate substrata within them. Thus, folktales and other genres like proverbs, riddles, and songs, each in its own contextual slot, are constitutive of consciousness—not only for the illiterate but for everyone.<sup>4</sup> Oral literature precedes other kinds in India in the lives of individuals and communities. It offers forms, presumptions of meaning, that are filled out by later living. It would be interesting to study Indians' favourite folktales and their role in modelling and "scripting" Indians' psychic and relational lives. Even Sanskrit mythologies have to be studied not only from texts, as they have been, but on the ground—as they are selectively remembered and told in context. For they are not only in written texts; they also have a parallel life in the oral traditions. They have been studied as if they were all equidistant, equally well-known to every native, equally important. And they have been quarried for the commentators' own (usually Western) concerns, like psychoanalysis, without any regard to which myths or episodes are valued by the users, or how and why. We need to work at Indian mythologies as if they were folklore in order to get a nuanced and true sense of what they are about. By doing so, we could also hear the dialogue between the Puranic mythologies and the non-literate creations like those carried and polished and renewed by nameless and subtly powerful grandmothers.

*Tales Have Relatives all Over the World*

In childhood when we heard stories like *The Tales' Revenge*, we could not have known that they were told all over India, even all over the world and that they had past lives in old texts like the *Kathasaritsagara* (The Ocean of Story). I didn't know for a long time that there were international indexes of types and motifs, marked with numbers<sup>5</sup> just as library books, bank accounts, and prisoners—and not only prisoners—are these days. I discovered these folktale indexes when I accidentally met an American folklorist, Edwin Kirkland, in a small town in Karnataka in my early twenties, and we spent two happy evenings swapping tales and riddles and proverbs. When he went back to Bombay, he sent me Stith Thompson's *The Folktale*,<sup>6</sup> in which I found worldwide parallels for my household tales. I then reread the Grimms, discovered Afanasiev's Russian tales, and found the eleventh-century Sanskrit reworkings of local tales, *The Ocean of Story*. This last work was translated into English by C.H. Tawney in the nineteenth century, in ten volumes, with fascinating cultural histories by philologist N. M. Penzer on things we used everyday, like betel leaves and umbrellas—their distribution, their uses in ritual, their profound symbolic values. The Brothers Grimms, or my idea of them, also became a model, and I started collecting folktales somewhat methodically from everyone around—my mother, aunt, friends, and people in the surrounding villages. I was twenty-three and I discovered what I had lived in and what had lived in me since childhood—the unofficial verbal world of the dialects, that literature without letters (*eluta eluttu* in Tamil).<sup>7</sup>

Connections and contrasts began to appear between the mother tongue tales and the Sanskrit myths, between the tales of Indian villages and kitchens and the European tales of Grimm and Afanasiev. I know now, for instance, that *The Tales' Revenge* has the same plot as *Faithful John* in Grimms' collection except for not having the motif to the untold tales that vow vengeance on the teller who won't tell them. *Faithful John* is about a loyal servant who overhears two birds talking about four disasters that await his princely master—a falling tree, a heavy city gate, a collapsing bridge and a snake in the bedroom. The birds also say that anyone who reveals the secret will turn to stone. Without any explanations, *Faithful John* averts the

disasters (as the birde's father does in *The Tales' Revenge*) and finally when the prince, his master, suspects John of molesting his wife when John has just saved her from a serpent in the bedroom, he is forced to reveal the secret of the four disasters. As he finishes telling each one, a part of his body is petrified. With the fourth secret, John is all stone, a statue. He is restored to life only when the prince's wife is willing to sacrifice her infant son.

I find from the type indexes, and from old issues of journals like the *Indian Antiquary* (especially 1890-1900), that this version of the story is also told in different parts of India. But the oldest version is in the eleventh-century collection, *Kathasaritsagara*, which opens with the revenge of the untold tales. *The Tales' Revenge* is told among the Gond and Baster tribes in Central India. There are German studies of *Faithful John* showing that the story was initially Indian.<sup>8</sup> But, strangely, or not so strangely, all the indexes, even the Indic ones, assimilate the Indian tale to the European type of *Faithful John*, for the indexes are made from the point of view of European materials. Reversals of form and meaning are not perceived or noted—only similarities in motif and generalized structure guide the typology. *Faithful John*, in the Grimms' collection, is about secrets that cannot be told or that can be told only on pain of death (also a classical Indian motif). But *The Tales' Revenge*, and many other oral tales told in summary above, focus on the tale that cries out to be told, the secret that will kill its keeper or swell the body till he or she tells it all somewhere, to a tree, to walls that have no ears. That is an important difference.

Tales are interregional or international in plot and motif but not in what they tell and mean. Types in the indexes keep tallies, but they tell us nothing about meanings. Only individual tellers and their tellings do. Tale types and motifs are useful bibliographical devices; they must not mask differences but lead us back to their sources, the tellings, to what are usually dismissed as variants. For not invariants, but their living use by the variants, is our study. The much-maligned but quicksilver variant is our true focus.

### *Stories for Small Children*

The stories change a great deal depending on where they are told,

who tells them, and to whom they are told. The grandmother telling a story to a child in a kitchen at dinner-time, the *vratakatha* (or ritual tale) told in the outer parts of the house or the yard, the mendicant teller who recounts a romantic tale on the verandah, or narratives of the professional bard who is invited to sing, dance, and recite a long religious or romantic epic in a rich man's hall or a public area—these are all different in genre, style, number of stock formulas, and topics, in the accompaniment of other actors or instruments or props like pictures.

We seem to move through a continuum here from *akam* to *puram*, from “interior” forms to “exterior” ones, as the classical Tamils would say. These two important words carry a set of concentric meanings according to context. *Akam* means interior, heart, self, house, household; *puram* means exterior, outer parts of the body, others, the yard outside the house, people outside the household. I have argued elsewhere that genres, themes, occasions, styles, and other discourse properties in the South Indian communities tend to illustrate the poetics of *akam* and *puram*. They come in arrays, in a sort of ecology of genres, where each has a niche, a function. Each occupies, expresses, and constitutes a “finite province of reality”. Myth and folktale, proverb and riddle, theatre and ritual performance have places on this continuum, this scale of forms.<sup>9</sup> Let me illustrate the notion that tales have special features for certain audiences with just one kind of story, the kind that is told to small children.

Here is one we all heard as small children—*Sister Crow and Sister Sparrow*. It is a story told in several languages today in South India:

Sister and Sister Sparrow are friends. Crow has a house of cowdung, Sparrow one of stone. A big rainstorm washes away Crow's house, so she goes to Sparrow and knocks on her door.

Because she is feeding her children, Sparrow makes Crow wait at first. When Crow knocks again, Sparrow is feeding her husband. When Crow knocks a third time, Sparrow is putting her children to bed. Finally, she lets Crow in and offers her several places to sleep. Crow chooses to sleep on the chickpea sack.

All night long, she munches on chickpeas and makes a *katum-*

*katum* noise. Whenever Sparrow asks her what the noise is, Crow says, "Nothing really. Remember you gave me a betelnut? I'm biting on it." By morning she has eaten all chickpeas in the sack. She cannot control her bowels, so she fills the sack with her excrement before she leaves.

Sparrow's children go there in the morning to eat some peas and muck their hands up with what Crow has left.

Sparrow is angry. She invites Crow again to visit, and when she is about to sit down, puts a hot iron spatula under her and brands her behind. Crow flees, crying *Ka! Ka!* in pain.

Children laugh a lot at this story—especially at the crow filling the sack with her excrement, Sparrow's children getting their hands dirty with it, and Sparrow's revenge. But it is an ambiguous story. Sparrow, obviously a tidy and successful housewife, is not given to incontinence; her house is firm, her routine well ordered—psychoanalysts would happily relate these virtues to anal continence.<sup>10</sup> Crow is disorderly, incontinent. Her house of dung cannot withstand a storm; she can neither control her all night guzzling nor the morning's unloading of her bowels. She is punished by a branding on her bottom. On the other hand, I have always felt a certain ambivalence, and so did the tellers and the other children, about Sparrow. She is not generous or hospitable; she keeps Crow waiting in the rain. Because of her grudging hospitality, one feels Sparrow somewhat deserves Crow's untidy return. Children laugh gleefully at Sparrow's discomfiture and enjoy Crow's filling the sack up with night soil.

The typical audience for this kind of story consists of children who are just being toilet trained (three to five years after birth, much later than children in America are trained). Patterns of toilet training are said to be significant in any psychoanalytic interpretation of personality. We know that Indian patterns of child rearing are strikingly different from American ones.<sup>11</sup> The Crow and the Sparrow story, I've often thought, was part of our toilet training. Many of the stories of this sort are not only about small animals (sparrows, ants, frogs) winning over bigger ones. They are also quite preoccupied with urination and defecation with sphincter control, as children of that



age tend to be. Martha Wolfenstein's book on children's humour documents this preoccupation in English children.<sup>12</sup> A collection of Indian stories told to small children would be instructive. Such stories also talk about the discomfiture of small people—mocked for their shortness or thick lips and the anger they feel, the projections that cannot quite distinguish self from nonself. I shall give only one more example—*Dwarfs*:

A he-dwarf and a she-dwarf lived together. When the dwarf went to dig holes in a field, the she-dwarf brought him food. She lowered her basket and called him:

"Midget, midget, come eat!"

When he heard her call him midget, the dwarf was angry. He went after her to cut her to pieces. She ran. But he followed till he caught her, and then cut her to pieces. He buried the pieces in the earth, and a *togari* plant sprouted on it. The *togari* plant grew tall. The pods dried and rattled in the wind. One day, when the dwarf was walking that way, he heard the *togari* plant rattle its pods and say, "Midget, midget, *gulak, gulak!*"

So he cut the plant and gave it, leaf and pods and all, to the buffalo. The buffalo ate it and mooed, "Midget, midget, *booynk, booynk!*"

He killed the buffalo and gave its meat to the dog, which began to bark, "Midget, midget, *owk, owk!*"

In a fury, the dwarf cut up the dog and threw it into the river. As it flowed over the stones, the river said, "Midget, Midget, *dadak, dadak.*"

So the dwarf took a knife and went into the river to cut it to pieces. But he drowned in it. Thus the he-dwarf and the she-dwarf came to a bad end.

But you are here and alive. Sleep now.

I must hasten to add that tales are not psychological in the way they treat the insides of each character; most folktale characters have no insides, no psychological depth. But the tales explore psychological issues in the design and outcome of the action. In the Crow and the Sparrow story, the contrast in characters, their houses, their behaviour,

and the presence of an audience of children in the story itself enact psychological notions. Like all fantasies (and unlike psychological novels), tales do not explore or express psychological truths in parts, characters, or single episodes but in relations, in the patterns and figures these elements make as a whole. All sorts of things we express conceptually are expressed through these narratives in their concrete relational webs: self and other, developmental stages, male and female, rites of passage, intimacy and alienation. Even more than mythologies, which contrary to fashionable psychological explanations, tend to deal with social and cosmic issues rather than psychological matters, the domestic tale is concerned with near kin and family, with *akam* in the Tamil sense, as interior forms, and therefore with all those relations with oneself and significant others that together make or unmake, move or arrest, the self in its career.

Tales speak of what cannot usually be spoken. Ordinary decencies are violated. Incest, cannibalism, pitiless revenge are explicit motifs in this fantasy world, which helps us face ourselves, envisage shameless wish fulfilments, and sometimes “by indirection find direction out”.

What is supposed by analysts to be repressed and hidden is open and blatant in these tales: fathers pursue daughters; brothers, sisters. Cannibal sisters eat their younger siblings; mothers marry sons unwittingly and bear sons, thereby messing up neat kinship diagrams; and young men wish to marry no women but instead their own left halves.

### *Beginnings and Endings*

The tales do not always follow an opening formula like “Once upon a time”. Yet special phrases found only in folktales, like *ondanondu kaladalli*, “at one time” in Kannada, and *ore oru urie*, “in a certain town” in Tamil, often mark the opening of tales. These turn the key for our entry into a tale world and a taletime, and let us cross a threshold into another kind of space.

And there are closing formulas that mark our exits from this tale world. My favourite in Kannada is *avaralli, navilli*, “they are there, and we are here”. In Telugu, they say, “The story has gone to Kanchi, and now we come home”. In Tamil, they say, *kade kadeyam, karanamam*,

“seems like a story, O a story, as if that’s a reason.”

These closures break any identification with the characters, separate our world from those of the stories, emphasize their fictive nature, their artifice and fantasy. Furthermore, when my favourite tellers tell a story, there are no adjectives at all describing inner or outer features (as there are in bardic tellings)—that is, there is no editorializing, no telling us what to feel. It is almost as if the story tells itself. When the characters speak, there is no sense of realism but a sense that they are speaking in quotation. They seem to say, *Larvatus prodeo*, “I advance, pointing to my mask”, as Roland Barthes would have said.

Folklore, contrary to romantic notions of its spontaneity of naturalness, is formal. It makes visible its forms. Identification and disidentification (of the listeners with the characters) have their triggers in the tales and happen at different stages of a tale or a performance—not unlike the processes by which a person is possessed or dispossessed in the course of a possession ritual.

I once found in a tale translated from Oriya a charming closing sentence. It says very well what I wish to say about breaking the link with the fictive world that may seem quite real while it lasts, though it is not. At the end of a romantic king-and-queen story, the Oriya teller says, “I saw the prince the other day at the market, but he wouldn’t talk to me.”

## References

1. For this observation I am indebted to Professor V. Narayana Rao, who is a speaker of Telugu and an expert on Telugu literature.
2. See Donald Davidson’s first essay in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). My discussion here, while it is indebted to these writings, arises out of my Indian materials. Actions and events are different ways of describing the same happenings. Furthermore, actions are a particular kind of event.
3. Karl Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* (Glasgow: Fontana/ Collins, 1980), 187: “We may include in World 3 . . . all the products of the human mind, such as tools, institutions, and works of art”, or what anthropologists would call culture.
4. Roma Chatterjee argues this point in detail in “Folklore and the

Formation of Popular Consciousness in a Village in the Purulia District of West Bengal", Ph.D. thesis, University of Delhi, 1985.

5. *The Tales' Revenge* would be the Indian analogue to Tale Type 516 in the international index. Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1964).
6. Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1946).
7. In the 1971 census more than 3,000 mother tongues are registered, with the names of the speech varieties that the speakers themselves said they spoke. Linguists have classified and subsumed these speech varieties, or dialects, under 105 or so languages that belong to four language families. Ninety of these 105 languages are spoken only by less than 5 per cent of the entire population, 65 of them by small tribes. Only 15 languages (including Sankrit) are written, read, and spoken by 95 per cent of the people. The literatures of these 15 languages, some of which have long histories, are just beginning to be studied and translated outside their regions. A literature like that of Tamil goes back 2,000 years, and several others like those of Bengali and Gujarati at least 800 years. We must recognize that, in addition to these, there are oral traditions in every community, Hindu, Jain, Christian, Muslim, and Parsi, and in each of the 3,000-odd mother tongues that we have classified under the 105 languages. These oral traditions consist of genres like proverbs, riddles, songs, ballads, tales, and epics, to name only a few. All these myriad dialects carry oral literatures, which is what we may call Indian folklore.

One way of defining verbal folklore for India is that it is the literature of the dialects, those mother tongues of the village, street, kitchen, tribal hut, and wayside teashop. This is the wide base on which all Indian literatures rest. We have valued and attended only to the top of the pyramid. For a detailed discussion of these materials for any study of Indian civilization, see A. K. Ramanujan, "Who Needs Folklore? : The Relevance of Folklore to South Asian Studies", The Wattumull Memorial Lecture, University of Hawaii, March 1988.

8. Quoted by Stith Thompson.
9. For a fuller exposition of this view, see my "Two Realms of Kannada Folklore", in *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

10. See Ernest Jones, "Anal-Erotic Character Traits", in *Papers on Psycho-analysis*, 5th ed. (London: Balliere, Tindall, and Cox, 1950).
11. Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World : A Psycho-Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), 1034.
12. Martha Wolfenstein, *Children's Humor: A Psychological Analysis* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1954).

# 3

## Children's Literature in India

Manorama Jafa

India has the privilege of bringing out *Panchatantra*—the world's first collection of stories for children in Sanskrit. The *Panchatantra* stories have been part of oral literature for thousands of years and the real authors are unknown. The popularity of the *Panchatantra* can be judged from the stories like 'The Monkey and the Crocodile', 'The Blue Jackal', 'The Flight of Pigeons', and 'The Rabbit and the Lion' which are enjoyed all over the world. Before the *Panchatantra* came to be written in Sanskrit by Vishnu Sharma for the instruction of the three foolish sons of an ancient king, many of the stories had already gone out of India with the travellers and merchants to the west Asian and European countries. These have been translated and adapted into more than 200 world languages. Most of the *Panchatantra* stories are animal tales which teach worldly wisdom and practical way of living to make life richer and happier. The plots of these tales are knitted around adult intrigues. Physically weak and helpless are shown winning over the strong and powerful with their wit and trickery. The themes of many of these tales were later taken by Aesop and other writers. Several Uncle Remus stories in America are also based on *Panchatantra* stories.

Thousands of years have gone by, the value system has changed with time but the entertainment and instructional value of these tales are still highly regarded. Most of the children's book publishers in all

languages in our country have brought our *Panchatantra* stories which are their best sellers.

In India, children have remained the integral part of the family, the nucleus of community life. The art and literature have been developed for the enjoyment of the entire family. India is a land of abounding tales and folktales. We have an oral tradition in children's literature going back to at least ten thousand years in the form of lullabies, cradle songs, tongue twisters, nursery rhymes, folktales and fairy tales. The story-tellers known as *kathavachakas* were the essential part of social life. The stories were moral, religious, mythological, often didactic but always entertaining. Stories from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Jataka*, *Kathasaritsagara* are popular all over the country. As the scripts in different languages developed, many of these were written on palm leaves and *bhojpatra* long before the age of paper and printing.

As the years went by and the child acquired the identity of his own, the special needs of the child came to be recognized. The formal schooling for children further promoted the development of textbooks and supplementary readers. The purpose was to teach and instruct the child. The didactic treatment of stories and poems for children is an outgrowth of the same strain of thought.

The concept of separate genre of children's literature has however come from the West. Contact with European countries and particularly with England and English language has led to the growth of modern children's literature in India.

The development of children's literature has passed through three different phases. The stories from oral and traditional literature were specially written for children. Then the selected literature for adults was translated and abridged. The modern, original and creative literature has developed only in the last century.

The present-day children's literature in India, in all languages continues to draw largely on traditional literature. The themes of the traditional stories were based on worldly wisdom, triumph of good over the evil, bravery, courage and even revenge. The *Jataka* tales alone were based on non-violent themes. The value system that dominated themes was oriented to the upper class, contemptuous of women other than in traditional roles like mother, wife and daughter.

ter. It was geared to individual achievement, often at the cost of community well-being. The male-oriented stories with adult themes dominated the scene. The child perspective was totally missing.

The hold of tradition in the popular mind is so strong that one has to only the vast display of children's books at the book fairs to realize how enormous is the influence. Nearly three-fourths of the children's literature in Indian languages is based on the traditional literature. Almost all Indian writers for children at some age or other have rewritten the old tales. This rewritten traditional literature is rich in content with appealing plots and is almost immediately accepted by the target audience. The popularity of the traditional literature is so much that the enterprising publisher, India Book House of Bombay brought out these stories in the form of comics. Astonishingly, children who had already enjoyed reading comics imported from other countries quickly switched over to these comics based on traditional stories. The parents, teachers, librarians in India and Indians living outside India encouraged children to read these comics in the hope that this would make children familiar with Indian culture and tradition.

The stories and books available in different Indian languages were also translated and adapted. Besides, some of the translated books from other world languages have also been abridged and translated. Some of these are Pierce Egan's *Robinhood*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Lois Carrol's *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*, Elizabeth Newbery's *Sindbad the Sailor*, Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* and other stories, Grimm brothers' fairy tales which contained *The Frog Prince*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

In the modern literature for children, the most important development is the change of adult perspective to the child's perspective. In 1967, the French writer Charles Perrault wrote *Little Red Riding Hood*, the world's first story for children with the perspective of a child. This was the beginning of a new era. Later, the realistic fiction have gained over fantasy and the childhood appeal became an essential feature of creative literature. The status of children's literature has changed over the years and it has now received serious critical consideration both scholarly and popular. It has gone beyond the



genre of school primers and is today considered the most important segment of the world literature. Themes of yester years are still relevant but their thematic treatment has changed beyond recognition. Age group considerations and entertainment values have widened the dimension. The likes and dislikes of children have gained over the set taboos and didactic treatment. Fantasy, fiction, science fiction, plays, poetry, non-fiction, information—both historical and geographical, —travelogue writing and much more have spread the canvas very wide indeed.

Picture books and special attention given to illustrations have added yet another dimension. A picture book is a visual media for young children. The language of a picture book speaks simply and directly to the child's heart. Its magic draws the child to look, listen and enjoy which an adult reads the book to him and later on he reads it by himself. Experiments with different styles, subjects, vocabulary, treatment and presentation, both with the text and visuals, have taken children's literature to new heights and made it more attractive and challenging to adventurous mind of its creators.

The history of children's literature in Hindi can be traced back to the riddles in verse written by Amir Khusro in the fourteenth century. In the nineteenth century Raja Shiv Prasad wrote a number of books. The better known are *Bachchon Ki Kahani* (1867), *Raja Bhoj Ka Sapna* (1876) and *Larkon Ki Kahani* (1876). The writers in Hindi took full advantage of the source material like *Panchatantra*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Bhartendu Harishchandra wrote a humorous book *Andhernagari*. He also published translations of *Robinson Crusoe* and several other English books for children published in England.

In the early twentieth century, several writers of adult stories began to write for children. During this period a number of magazines for children also came out. The foremost amongst these were *Vidyarthi* (1914), *Shishu* (1915) and *Balasakha* (1917).

Premchand wrote *Kutte Ki Kahaniyan* and *Jungal Ki Kahaniyan*. Sohan Lal Dwivedi's collection of poems *Balbharati*, *Shishu Bharati* and *Bigul* and patriotic poems are well known. The first full-length fiction for children was *Khar Khar Mahadev* by Bhupen Narain Singh. It was serialised in *Balasakha* in 1957. Some of the known writers in Hindi are Sudershan, Swarn Sahodar, Ram Naresh Tripathi, Sohan Lal

Dwivedi, Subhadra Kumari Chawhan, Vyathit Hridaya, Nirankar Dev Sewak, Vishnu Prabhakar, Harikrishna Devsare, Manorama Jafa, Jai Prakash Bharati, Manohar Verma, Sri Prasad, Shakuntala Sirothia, Chandrapal Singh 'Mayank' and many others. The first research oriented monthly journal *Bala Sahitya Samiksha* edited by Dr. Rashtrabandhu has been published from Kanpur.

Bengali is a rich language in children's literature. The modern creative literature can be said to have developed with the stories published in Bengali when the magazine *Digdarshana* (1818) was published under the leadership of John Clerk Marshman from Serampur Press in Bengal. The Christian missionaries also brought out textbooks for children and the School Book Society was established at Calcutta in 1816-17 to meet the growing need for school books.

*Betala Panchabinsati*, twenty-five fantasy stories of king Vikramaditya was transcribed by Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar from the Hindi version of *Betala Pachchisi* in 1847. This book was taken as a textbook for schools and was loved by children. The appearance of several magazines for children towards the end of nineteenth century provided opportunities for creative writers to get their work published. Rabindranath Tagore and his family made a good contribution. Tagore's *Galpa Salp*, a collection of short stories and *Chele Bhutanor Chada*, a collection of rhymes are well known. Upendra Kishore started a popular magazine *Sandesha*. His son Sukumar Roy was an author and illustrator and took over its publication. It was later on edited by Satyajit Ray—the well-known film maker. Other popular magazines for children are *Anandamela* and *Shuktara*. A notable feature in Bengali children's literature is that almost all eminent authors of adult books have written for children. Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, his brother Abanindranath Tagore, eminent film maker Satyajit Ray, Gyanpith award winner Ashapurna Debi, Lila Majumdar, Premendra Mitra, Nalini Das, Sisir Kumar Majumdar and several other writers have enriched the children's literature in Bengali.

Bengal also has a galaxy of artists who have specialized in illustrating books for children not only in Bengali but also books in English, Hindi and other languages.

Gujarati language has abundance of literature based on folklores and traditional literature. Gijubhai Badeka's contribution to children's literature is praiseworthy. He developed humorous characters and his anecdotes of Advo are loved by young readers. The known writers are Dakshinamurti, Hari Prasad Vyas, Jivram Joshi, Makarand Dave, Yashwant Mehta, Natwarlal Vimawala, Dhananjay Shah, Ramanlal Shah, Girish Ganatra, Labhuben Mehta, Hansaben Mehta and Harish Nayak.

In Marathi language, magazines have played a significant role in pioneering literature for children. American Mission brought out a magazine for children *Balbodhmewa* in 1872. This was the first magazine for children in Marathi. It catered mostly Biblical stories. At present *Kishor* is the most popular magazine. Among the well-known writers are Sane Guruji, N.D. Tamhankar, B.R. Bhagwat, Durga Bhagwat, D.S. Desai, Kaveri Karve, Gopinath Talwalkar, V.D. Sathe, Hari Narayan Apte, Girija Kheer, Jayant Narliker and Sai Paranjpye.

An unique feature in Maharashtra is Pustak Yatra, when the writers of children's books travel to different villages and towns and interact with children. Books are publicised and sold during the *Yatra*.

The State of Kerala, which has achieved near total literacy, has a strong tradition in oral literature in Malayalam. *Bilathi Visesham* by K.P. Kesava Menon is one of the earliest travelogues written for children. Most of the children's literature in Malayalam is based on translations from other languages either Indian or foreign. Adaptations and abridgements have been done extensively to enrich children's literature. In 1948, the first magazine for children *Balan*, a weekly, edited by Mathew M. Kuzhiveli was published. M. M. Kuziveli, V. Madhavan Nair and Sumangala are some of the famous writers. Kerala has a government organization, *State Institute of Children's Literature* at Trivandrum.

In Tamil, *Aviveka Kurukatha* by Veetamamuniver is the earliest humorous story for children was written in the eighteenth century. Christian Society of Nagercoil published a children's magazine *Bale Deepihai* in 1840. The magazine *Ambulimama* was started in 1947, which is now published in eleven Indian languages including

English. *Gokulam*, another popular children's magazine was brought out in 1972 but it had to shut down for want of finances. Al Valliappa and Kalvi Gopalakrishnan are well-known writers in Tamil.

In Urdu, *Rani Ketaki Ki Kahani* by Insha Alla Khan is the first children's story written in 1893. Urdu has very rich humour for children. Azim Beg Chughtai's short stories, Syed Imtiaz Ali's *Chacha Chakkan* stories are delightful reading. Well-known writers in Urdu like Mirza Ghalib, Iqbal, Pandit Brij Narain Chakbast, Tirlok Chand Mahroon, Krishan Chandar, Qudsia Zaidi, Dr. Zakir Hussain, S. G. Haider and others made valuable contributions.

The publications in Indian languages have somehow not been able to match the books in English in quality of writing, illustration, book design and overall production. English language publishers in India encourage creative and original writing much more than the publishers in Indian languages. Today forty per cent of the children's books are published in English language.

The present-day book scene owes much to the setting up of Children's Book Trust (CBT) in 1957 at New Delhi. Founded by K. Shankar Pillai, it is an exclusive children's book publishing house which has been a trendsetter in India. CBT brought out its first set of two illustrated books, *King's Choice*, a rewritten folktale in English by K. Shiv Kumar and illustrated by Reboti Bhushan and *Varsha Ki Boond* in Hindi written by K. Deshpande and illustrated by K. K. Hebbar, in 1961. Most of the titles published by CBT were in English and later translations were brought out in some major Indian languages, using the same illustrations and the same format. Almost all the picture books today are of the same size, 18 cm × 24 cm being chosen to avoid waste of paper and easy to pack. The books are in soft cover to keep the price low in order to reach a wider audience. This is an excellent example of publishing in a multi-lingual environment.

CBT encouraged new talent in writing and illustrations and also organized training programmes to upgrade skills and remained open to new ideas. In 1978 they organized their first competition for writers in English and invited fiction for children. *The Kaziranga Trail* by Arup Kumar Datta won the first prize and also Shankar's Award. This was the first adventure novel in an Indian setting and with

Indian characters. It was published in 1979. To promote original writing they organize competitions in English and Hindi every year and give attractive cash prizes. Manuscripts range from fiction, non-fiction, plays, poetry, travelogue and humour for all ages. In 1979, CBT organized the first International Children's Book Fair at New Delhi which provided a welcome opportunity to Indian writers, illustrators, editors, designers, and publishers to look at the large variety in children's books, from other countries.

In the sixties, a new development in English language books for children was the publication of picture books. The first picture book *Home* published by CBT in 1965. It was written by Kamala Nair and illustrated by K.S. Kulkarni. In 1982, CBT also brought out a book titled *Writing for Children* by Manorama Jafa in 1983. CBT published *Bibliography of Children's Books Published in India* which covers 7,000 titles in English, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. The books have been classified broadly into three age groups, below five, five to ten and eleven to sixteen.

The National Book Trust (NBT), a semi-government organization was established in 1957. It has been bringing out children's books since 1970 under the scheme *Nehru Bal Pustakalaya*. It published its first illustrated book *Bapu* by F.C. Freitas the same year. Today it is publishing in thirteen Indian languages. NBT's scheme of *Operation Blackboard* in 1989 has encouraged children's book publishing in all languages.

National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), another semi-government organization established in 1961 also publishes children's books for supplementary reading in schools.

The popular magazines for children in English are *Children's World*, *Target*, *Champak* and *Chanda Mama*. The notable children's book publishers in English are, Children's Book Trust (CBT), National Book Trust (NBT), Ratna Sagar, Delhi Press, Ratna Bharti, Publications Division, Vikas, Frank Brothers, Hemkunt, Dreamland, National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), Pitamber, Sterling, Rupa and Company and Penguins. A notable factor in English publishing is that most of the publishers in English language are based at Delhi.

Among the well-known writers in English are, Shankar, Ruskin Bond, Mulk Raj Anand, Manorama Jafa, Arup Kumar Dutta, Nilima Sinha, Kaveri Bhatt, Sarojini Sinha, Dilip Salvi, Pratibha Nath, Vernon Thomas, and Manoj Das. Some of the known illustrators for children are Reboti Bhushan, Jagdish Jashi, Mrinal Mitra, Mickey Patel, Atanu Roy, Phalguni Das Gupta, Ramesh Bagchi, Niren Sen Gupta, Subir Roy, B.G. Verma, Tapas Guha, Shuddhosatva Basu and Pulak Biswas.

Another landmark in the development of children's literature was the establishment of an unique voluntary organization, The Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC) in 1981, at new Delhi. This was founded by late K. Shankar Pillai, the founder of Children's Book Trust. The AWIC is an active forum for the promotion and development of creative literature for children. To promote reading habit in children, the AWIC organizes a chain of children's libraries in villages, towns and cities and has won the IBBY—Asahi International Reading Promotion Award in 1991. AWIC has been bringing out India's first and the only professional quarterly journal on children's literature *Writer and Illustrator* since 1981. AWIC has also organized the Indian Section of International Board on Books for Young People (Indian BBY) since 1991. AWIC's achievement oriented writers' workshops are well-known and hundreds of creative writers have benefited from it.

A significant contribution of AWIC is the promotion of children's book illustrators and their work. They have many firsts to their credit. In 1989, AWIC displayed the original illustrations of twenty-seven Indian artists at Bologna International Children's Book Fair in Italy for the first time. In 1991, a major exhibition of original illustrations of children's books was held in Delhi. On the invitation of Bologna International Children's Book Fair, in 1992 AWIC organized a very special exhibition of original illustrations work of sixty-four Indian artists of children's books at Bologna. The first ever catalogue titled *Indian Illustrators 1990-1992* was published on this occasion. AWIC organized the First National Exhibition of Picture Books at Delhi in 1993. In 1998, AWIC will host the 26th IBBY Congress, where about 1200 delegates from all over the world are expected to participate. The theme of the Congress will be *Peace Through Children's Books*.

The increased interest in the development of indigenous creative literature for children has led many organizations and institutions to hold seminars, conferences and training programmes. National Centre for Children's Literature has recently been set up by National Book Trust and it is hoped that the Centre will promote rapid development of quality literature for children in all languages.

Producing children's books is like any other creative activity such as painting, music and dance. In other countries, children's books are considered a part of culture which in India it has been tagged with education. But recently the scene has been changing and the cultural organizations have begun to extend their patronage to children's books.

India is a large country with seventeen languages, 1652 dialects and 880 million people of which forty per cent are children. With the spread of education, there is a vast readership waiting to be served. It is no longer a struggle to justify the need for quality books for children but an insistence, that all children in India have a right to be given the best of books.

# 4

## **Cross-Culturalism in Indian Literature for Children**

*Varsha Das*

Communication in today's world has become one of the basic necessities, particularly when an urge to come closer and to know each other better grows as a natural outcome of human development. Columbus nearly got lost in search of India and discovered America instead. But today, we have reached Antarctica, landed on the moon, established laboratories in space and sent satellites to relay programmes of one country to the rest of the world. Strange is not so strange and the unfamiliar is not so unfamiliar any more. It had taken hundreds and thousands of years for a man to formulate a spoken language, and then to devise a script to transcribe it.

Hundreds of years passed before man found a medium to communicate through sight and sound thousands before he could invent a printing press. This continuous pursuit to expedite communicate and be intelligible paved the way to various other skills like translation, transliteration, interpretation, adaptation etc. These skills are needed practically in all the disciplines, be it science of the humanities, literature or the technologies.

Such a vast spectrum of human existence has a child as its starting point. There are no two opinions about the fact that the future of the world, a country, a community and a family depends upon the quality of the young generation, and further, that the investment in



education is a unique investment for all-round development, material and spiritual. A child's curiosity, her thirst for knowledge, her questioning and seeking mind knows no limit. She finds the courage to venture into the realm of the unknown. Her eyes see more than what actually happens on the surface. Her inquisitive nature goes beyond certain physical phenomena. Most of these pursuits are to enrich her own life with the knowledge and experience of others to develop a better understanding of the other, to widen the horizon by getting acquainted with the lives of others and, thereby, making her own life better and happier.

The best way to achieve this goal is to actually live in different places and absorb the culture and ethos of other races. But this has its own limitations. It is physically impossible to travel all over the country or all over the world, in one lifetime. A practical approach, therefore, is to acquire information and knowledge through the oral and written word, and through electronic audio-visual media (which is comparatively new). It is quite effective and far-reaching and has been internationalized. In a country like India, all forms—oral, written and electronic—co-exist.

A formal school system can become impersonal and narrow especially if it does not open its doors and windows to what is indigenous as well as the so-called 'alien'. A person next door can be a stranger if there is a thick wall between their minds. When the mind opens up, its capacity to absorb is phenomenal!

In a country like India, with her multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-language dimensions, with her expanse of geographical and historical vistas, there is always a scope to break and to cement. At times, communication becomes impossible even with the people of a neighbouring state, because their language is so very different. In cosmopolitan cities like Bombay and Delhi, we sometimes cannot communicate with our own neighbours except through a link language like Hindi or English. In families where there are mixed marriages, where the parents belong to two different linguistic groups, their children either pick up both the languages or they all speak in the third language, the language of that region, or in English!

In my own house, when my daughter was barely three years old,

she became conscious of the fact that her parents spoke two different languages. She spoke to her father in Oriya and in Gujarati to me. At times, she would split even a single sentence into two different languages as if a part of it was addressed to the other parent! Once when we went to Orissa, my daughter recited a nursery rhyme in Hindi to her uncles and aunts. They could not follow because it was in Hindi. She quickly translated each and every line into Oriya! The rhyme told the story of a sparrow and her four chicks. As soon as their wings grew stronger, they flew out of their nest, went in different directions all over the world and eventually returned to their own nest, finding it by far the cosiest and sweetest place.

The point I wish to make is that a universal theme of this kind can be translated or adapted in any language of the world. It does not emphasise a particular culture. It contains an emotion which is valid for all sentient beings like birds, animals and human beings. But what happens when it is in the language of a country that has no sparrow? The translator, in such cases, would use her discretion and change it to a bird commonly found there, because the rhyme is not so much about a sparrow as about the idea that 'home' is an abode of love and warmth, and therefore, the best place in the world. This motivates the child to look for these qualities in her own home and to feel secure.

A constructive and positive mind does not reject differences but activates individual potentials for further growth. Indian literature in sixteen major languages and innumerable dialects flourishes on the strength of such minds devoted to enriching individuals and their literature by assimilating all that is rejuvenating in other cultures.

Literature not only reflects culture, it also moulds culture. To know one's own culture and also that of others needs a medium. This medium is generally in the form of art or literature; or in computer terminology, it is software.

All the literature of the world began with oral tradition. In our primary oral culture, thinking was formulated in mnemonic patterns, rhythmic and repetitive forms. They enabled the orator to retain and retrieve thoughts. Oral literature in India, one hears since birth till one dies. At every stage of life there is a ritual accompanied

by stories, songs and prayers. These little traditions work themselves out and keep flowing in the life-stream of people. Such parallel streams flow all over the country. That is where one finds unity in diversity.

Development of Indian literature is concurrent to the development of language and script, and the development of children's literature is correlated to children's education. All the four streams are independent, and at the same time mutually interdependent for their own growth. Missionary schools had opened in many parts of the country and they created a need for school textbooks in regional languages. The content for these books was culled out of the literature available for adults. The stories which can be enjoyed by children were certainly found in good number. This was the beginning of children's literature in most of the regions.

The stories picked up from adult literature had two main sources, one was the abundant treasure of Sanskrit literature. The stories from *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha* were translated. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were retold. The other source was Western literature. Aesop's fables were translated into Indian languages from their English translations. *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, stories of Lewis Carroll, Hans Christian Andersen etc. were also translated, not necessarily in the language suitable for children, but because of their content they were accepted as children's literature.

The first book for children in Marathi was the translation of Aesop's Fables entitled *Balabodha Muktavali*, Published in 1806. It was translated by Sakha Pandit. In Hindi this genre developed later than others. *Hitopadesha* was translated from Sanskrit to Hindi by Badrilal in 1851. *The History of Sanford and Merton* was translated in 1861 by Bansidhar. This is a collection of stories with a linking narrative and some moral value. In Sindhi, the first book for children was a translation of Aesop's stories published in 1854. The first book in Bengali was a textbook published by the missionaries of Srirampur. The situation was almost similar in Oriya, Assamese and Gujarati. It was Gijubhai Badheka of Gujarat who established child as an individual and created a place for child in literature.

The idea of creating a special literature for children was to provide entertainment and joy, but due to its direct link with education it was

loaded with messages and instructions. It is easy to instruct but very difficult to provide joy through written text. The literature which was translated carried the flavour of the culture of its origin and the missionaries who produced literature on the Indian soil could not totally avoid their roots. Thus the beginning of children's literature in India emerged from cross-cultural sources.

But committed educationists and value creators like Gijubhai Badheka in Gujarat, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Upendrakishore Raychowdhury in Bengal wrote and retold a lot for children. Gijubhai opened the treasure of folk-literature and recreated stories for children. Soon, many similar stories emerged in other languages as retold folktales.

Along with the original writing for children one finds a large number of books translated from the languages in which this genre had developed well. Rabindranath and Sarat Chandra were rendered for children in many Indian languages. Bharati was rewritten in all the four major languages of South India.

While rendering children's literature from one Indian language to the other comes across two different exercises. One is a translation and the other is adaptation. While translating, one introduces the culture of the original work to the children of the other language region, but while adapting one tries to assimilate and make the alien one's own.

National Book Trust, India, is an autonomous organization under the Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development and is the only organization in the country which publishes children's books simultaneously in thirteen languages, including English, under the series *Nehru Bal Pustakalaya*. These books promote national integration by providing common reading material in their mother tongue to children all over India, on a wide range of subjects. They cater to four age-groups namely, pre-school, 6-8, 8-11 and 11-14. The books in this series can be originally written in any one of the thirteen languages for its translation in the rest of the twelve. This exercise poses peculiar problems regarding the cultural content and the language.

It is said in the *Encyclopaedia Americana*:

Literary translation is never a matter of word-for-word equivalences. The meaning of a paragraph, with all associations that it had for its author, must be rendered, and if this is done, the sentences will probably bear only a loose resemblance to those of the original. French or Spanish constructions can often be exactly matched in English. German generally needs recasting, Latin, Sanskrit and Russian require varying degrees of expansion, which are all presently beyond the capacity of anything but a trained human mind.

Translators of Indian languages face similar problems while translating from the language of one region to the other. In the eastern languages there is no clear indication of gender in verbs, whereas Hindi has two and Gujarati has three! According to an article on “A Linguistic Theory of Translation”:

Translation is that branch of the applied science of language which is specifically concerned with the problem—or the fact—of the transference of meaning from one set of patterned symbols into another set of patterned symbols.

Mere transference of meaning cannot provide lucid translation. An expression in a language carries with it the impact of history, traditions, social patterns, religion etc. of that region. Translation has to respect the culture of the original language as well as that of the rendered one. For example, in a Bengali story there was a reference to delicious fish-curry spreading its aroma all around. This aroma works like a magnet and attracts all family members to the kitchen. While translating this story into Gujarati the translator cannot change fish-curry into any other dish which might be more popular amongst Gujaratis, because the translator is introducing Bengali culture through the translation. It may become difficult for a vegetarian Gujarati child to imagine the feelings of a fish-loving Bengali!

Adaptation has, therefore, been more popular in children’s literature. The person who adapts retains the story not only by changing the names of persons and places but the total cultural milieu. In good adaptations it is difficult to know whether it has been taken from

somewhere or has been originally written by the author. Leo Tolstoy's stories have been skillfully adapted by one of the famous Hindi writers Jainendra Kumar Jain. One would never be able to suspect its authenticity unless one has read the original. In an adaptation of this nature, an experience is re-experienced internally. Internalized experience forms a value which is precious for self-expression.

Let us take another example. There is a story of an elephant published by the National Book Trust, India, called *Rupa the Elephant*. This elephant is in the zoo. It gets bored with its own grey colour and desires to have colourful patches and stripes all over. Various birds and animals lend their colours to the elephant but the children get scared of it and refuse to ride on it. This saddens the elephant. It weeps, and then jumps into a pool and washes off all the colours. The children are happy to get back their old friend. The elephant is also happy to have them on its back. This is again a sweet little story of universal emotions, depicting affectionate bonds between human beings and animals.

The countries in which elephants are not used for a joy-ride can take up any other animal and narrate the same story through an adaptation. But a country like the Republic of Maldives, where there are neither elephants nor any other animals except a few cats, it is just not possible to make a local adaptation. This story, therefore, can be translated into Divehi, the local language of the Maldives, as an Indian story, depicting Indian flora and fauna. Its realistic setting would not change. The elephant to Maldivian children might seem a character from fantasy! But the feelings expressed by the children of the story, and the tears in the eyes of the elephant when they refused to sit on it, are all so human and universal that in spite of a strange central figure, the story would be enjoyed in its translation.

The cultural aspect of the original story, thus remains unchanged and gets transferred when it is translated into another language. It retains its alien character. But this is often necessary to arouse curiosity in a child's mind about unfamiliar living beings and names. It helps the process of psychological and intellectual growth. Goethe had said more than 200 years ago that translators are to be regarded as bustling go-betweens who recommend a half-veiled beauty to us as an extremely pleasing one: they arouse an irresistible desire for

the original.

A mention should be made about a Japanese story for children translated into several Indian languages, published by a Delhi publisher. The story is about a dinosaur languishing in a desert. The author of this story is Shinji Tajima, a Japanese; the illustrator Kang Woo Hyon is a Korean and it has been translated from Japanese into Hindi by this writer with the help of an English knowing Japanese. Four different cultures have come together to produce a picture-story book for children which, although a translation of a foreign book presents itself as a beautiful enjoyable Indian book. It gives a subtle message of peace with the illustrations depicting flora and fauna familiar to Indian children. Such a story does not require adaptation. The Indian versions arouse desire to read more such stories.

If an author or a translator can create emotional vibrations in child's heart and mind, one can certainly call it a successful work. The contributing factors are visuals, story content and lucid flowing translation.

It is easy to select a work that can be translated or adapted. One may like a story as an adult reader, but the theme, concept, its presentation etc. may be totally unsuitable for translation. Even if only one of these features is not suitable for the target readership, it is better to drop the idea of translation.

The genre of poetry is supposed to be the most difficult to translate. Some people have attempted adaptations of nursery rhymes like Jack and Jill, but I personally feel that there is no need to translate or adapt rhymes with a foreign cultural element. India's oral literature is so rich in quality and quantity that it is just not necessary to borrow from the West. Why should one feel so impoverished or inferior when our own heritage is so rich? The issue of nursery rhymes should not be confused with thematic poems for children. Translation of poems for children becomes effective when it creates rhythm and rhyme in the language of translation. Non-sense rhymes simply cannot be translated. Native flavour is the most important element in such rhymes.

The most vital and decisive factor to be considered in taking up any work for translation or adaptation is our child, who is going to

read the translated or adapted version. We have to ask ourselves a few questions before we start rendering it into another language:

1. Which child would be interested in this book? Urban? Rural? Or both? Educated or semi-educated?
2. Is the theme familiar or unfamiliar?
3. Is the concept intelligible or abstract?
4. Is the setting known or unknown?
5. Would the child be able to identify himself/herself with the characters of the story?
6. Would it help the child to develop any of his/her faculties?
7. Would it increase his/her curiosity, spirit of inquiry of imagination?
8. Does it have universal appeal or does it relate to a specific region or culture?
9. Would it widen his/her horizons, even if it is on an unfamiliar footing?

Answers to all these questions would enable the translator to take the decision, first, whether the book in question should be rendered into another language or not, and second, whether it should be translated or adapted.

It is said that "Translation is a great misunderstanding." There is a possibility of such misunderstanding because intercultural communication is difficult to establish. It becomes all the more difficult when countries like Japan, with a homogeneous culture come into contact with India or Pakistan, with pluralistic cultures. The translator, in such cases, requires a good knowledge of both the cultures, that is, the culture of the country from where the original story is taken and also the culture of the country for which it would eventually be translated. For example, while describing summer in the desert area of Rajasthan, one can visualize parched land and dying animals. But summer in a cold region of the Himalayas could be a matter of joy! A single word like 'hot' or 'heat' can have so many different meanings in the cultural and textual context.

Transfer of the cultural aspect is the real crux of translation activity. How much of it can be transferred? And in what manner?



Understanding of this would prompt the translator to decide whether the work should be translated or adapted. The onus is, therefore, essentially on the translator.

Translators provide the ship, the map and the compass for the exploration of unknown regions. Positive cross-cultural influences may fulfil the Upanishadic concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world-family) only if the children of the present and of the future generations can understand that an orchestra can play a beautiful symphony when each and every instrument retains its individuality and plays the tune in harmony to achieve that melodious symphony: a unified Indian culture evolves out of cross-cultural influences.

# 5

## **Children's Literature in India: The Changing Trends**

Navin Menon

The story of India begins with traditions. These traditions continue to play an important part in its growth. No more are there sessions under the light of stars with children and adults sitting round a crackling fire listening to an elderly person chanting tales of heroes, warriors, or even animals. The trend of nuclear families has even deprived many a child of 'homely' sessions with grandparents. Yet the tide flows. . . minstrels, *mukhiyas*, grandparents have now given way to story books and other media. Though these cannot in any way take the place of the all-important personal relationships, they do provide a fillip to a hungry community striving to gain a foothold in life.

When we talk of children's literature in India, we mean children's literature in the eighteen regional languages plus English. While it would not be possible to assess children's literature in India in its entirety in a short article such as this one, we could concentrate on the trends common to all of them. Our attempt would be to focus on the attitudes and awareness of publishers who in turn influence the work of their writers.

Children's literature in India as a genre is a fairly recent phenomenon. That does not mean children's literature was non-existent in the earlier days. The epics, classics, Indian lore which provided

reading material to adults, was equally shared by children in the family. In fact, certain stories from the *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesha*, *Brihatkatha*, *Jataka* and *Kathasaritsagara* were of considerable interest to children and provided them fun and necessary moral education. The same applies even today, with practically all these stories having been adapted in different regional languages.

Our focus here would be not so much on traditional literature but on creative Indian literature in English. Principally because English is an important link language and the major chunk of books produced in India are in this language, catering to the urban section of the society—the people with the buying power (since 40% of the Indian population have poor financial resources, hence restricted literacy and limited readership).

Despite this, it is heartening to note, that India has developed its own unique children's literature that promotes national pride and culture. This culture or the love of it makes up the soul of India. All questions, therefore, find their answer largely woven in this and all literature finds its roots securely embedded in its doctrines.

The first books exclusively meant for children came to be written with the arrival of the British missionaries. The process began with textbooks, slowly diversifying into magazines and then into stories for children. Once the beginning was made, Indian writers took to it with earnestness. State governments, too, took the initiative because they felt the need for regional language children's books.

As far as exclusive books for children in English are concerned, it was the renowned cartoonist, K. Shankar Pillai, or Shankar as he was popularly known, who pioneered the movement. He realized the need for children to have their own literature to read at leisure and, more importantly, for pleasure, at a price well within the reach of the average Indian child. With this in mind, he founded the Children's Book Trust (CBT) in India in 1957. He began by writing stories himself, later encouraging other writers to contribute to this much needed but neglected field.

These writers, some of whom had been writing for adults chose popular subjects like Indian lore and folktales. This had its advantages. Indian lore being favourites with children and adults alike, had a lot of sales potential. Contentwise, too, it was full of wisdom,

rich in wit and was classified as value-oriented work. It reflected and preserved the unscientific thinking, feelings, superstitions, faith, and dreams of simple people, thus earning a permanent place among perennial favourites. After Indian lore and folktales came the fairy tales. These had an edge over the folktales in that, the characters—animal or human were introduced in just enough detail, with good and evil, clever and foolish, cleverly opposed. Now and then, a magical element—a force would move into ensure aid and protection to the oppressed and the downfall of the wicked! Thus, making this segment of children's literature complete in itself.

But for how long? Preservation of culture is one thing and the revival and modification of it quite another. While we may reinforce ethnic consciousness, we must be careful not to make it static, for culture must be seen as something dynamic. Hence, in keeping with the traditions, from among these writers emerged some with new ideas for creating new and creative literature.

The man who broke with this tradition was again Shankar. He pioneered this change by writing original stories for children. Some of these stories are best-sellers even today. Example: *Life with Grandfather*, *Mother is Mother*, *Sujata and the Wild Elephant*, *Hari and Other Elephants*.

Today the Trust has to its credit over 700 titles in English, Hindi, and in other Indian languages such as Gujarati, Assamese, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Malayalam, Kannada, Bengali, and Punjabi. These include fiction, non-fiction, folklore, and fantasy, adventure, natural history, humour, apart from a variety of attractive picture books.

With the focus having shifted from concern for education and moral development in children to the concept of reading as an enjoyable, entertaining and satisfying experience, more Indian publishers entered the field resulting in the Indian book world fast becoming a competitive market.

The Government owned National Book Trust (NBT) which was established in 1957 to promote books and the book reading habit. It started their children's section, *Nehru Bal Pustakalaya* series.

One of the country's largest publishing and book selling Government enterprises, the Publications Division, which is bringing out illustrated and authentic publications on a wide spectrum of subjects

ranging from art and culture, travel and tourism, biographies of national leaders, Gandhian literature, science, education, history and general reference, added a children's book section with short stories, biographies, folktales, epics, flora and fauna, and history.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), which are mainly textbook publishers, have now printed some information and picture books as well.

Vikas Publishing House has been in the forefront of Indian publishing for over two decades. It has brought out several good children's books. Madhuban Educational School books are among its highly successful publications.

India Book House (IBH) founded in 1951, began as a distributing company for imported books. Today they publish children's books and books on management and general subjects. IBH's *Echo* books and *Cheeta* and *Chimpu* series for children culminated in the launch of the very popular *Amar Chitra Katha* comics for children based on stories from Indian mythology, history and folklore.

Frank Educational Aids (Pvt.) Ltd. have published several concept books, short stories, classics, activity books and fables for children.

Ratna Sagar (Pvt.) Ltd. are also committed to giving Indian children quality books. They have books for all ages written by Indian authors. Their concept books for pre-school children are by far the best. Besides concept books, they have books on living science, adventures with mathematics, environmental studies, moral science, history, general knowledge, rhymes and general fiction.

Thomson Press brought out some good hardbound books for general reading but have now bowed out of the market.

About two years ago in 1992, two leading commercial publishers Penguin India and Rupa and Co. entered the market with their children's segment—Puffin India and Indus Peacock—a new imprint of Rupa floated with Harper Collins Publications, U.K. Rupa and Co. were among the first to go into children's books seriously. They started off with reprints of popular Western stories, but have since developed a publishing programme of their own, and now this collaboration.

Recently, Sahitya Akademi launched their children's section with

books in Dogri, English, Hindi, Marathi, Urdu, their subjects ranging from short stories to science fiction to wild life and realistic stories, feeling confident there is a huge market for children's literature waiting to be tapped.

Besides these there are other private publishers like Hemkunt and Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (Sahmat) which have made significant contributions in this field.

To return to the area of reference, children's literature in India can be analyzed at three levels: theme, form and general approach.

Thematically children's literature falls under two broad categories—fiction and non-fiction. Fiction can be divided into:

- (a) Traditional literature, that is stories from our epics, classics and folklore, and
- (b) Original and creative writing in the form of short stories, full-length general fiction and science fiction, plays, poetry, rhymes and picture books.

Non-fiction includes, biographies, history and general information. Books and stories in 'comic' form are quite popular with children, also children's magazines in regional languages and English.

In the past, there were certain set and rigid ideas about what should be given to children—an element of overprotection. Lately one finds a change in this attitude. No more do we underestimate a child's natural intelligence and understanding, rather an effort is made not to talk down to the child but to look up to it! He is treated as an individual and not part of a whole. The leaning is more towards realistic stories to project to the child that literature does reflect real life. Fantasies and fairy tales are also not discouraged.

A visit to any bookstall will reveal the kind of literature available for children today. Where there are a whole lot of books on traditional literature, there is another level as well with new and creative ideas. In the following pages you will read about a few of them. I must admit, the assessment will lean more towards CBT—it being closer to my own experience—yet that is not the only reason. CBT has been a trend-setter of sorts and the books chosen are for convenience alone.

To encourage creative writing, the Children's Book Trust has been organizing annually a Competition for Writers of Children's Books. What began in 1978 merely as a creative forum where new ideas could be tried and authors discovered, has turned into a mega industry with more and more avenues being explored. CBT's competitions have unwittingly set the trend and the ball rolls on, gathering strength by and by.

It would not be out of place, therefore, to scan the rules, set by the organizers, for the competitors have taken their cue from there and what we have before us today by way of trend-setters is a result of meticulous thinking and careful planning, which has flowed from the foresight of Shankar, you could say.

The first competition for writers, as has been mentioned, was held in 1978. Three prizes were offered. The rules for entry were simple with no specification of subject or length except that the entries were to be on any subject of interest to children for general reading. They were to have an Indian background and reflect Indian life. The criterion was original, unpublished work, and therefore, textbooks, verses or re-written/translated folklore/classical legends were not allowed.

Arup Kumar Dutta's, *The Kaziranga Trail*, won the first prize. The manuscript, apart from being an excellent work of fiction, showed remarkable authenticity of background and served an important social purpose—the importance of preventing poaching of rhinos. The story is set in the Kaziranga wildlife sanctuary in Assam. Dhanai, Bulbul, and Jonti accidentally find a rhinoceros which has been killed for its horn, prized for its supposed medicinal properties. When they report the incident to the District Forest Officer, they are invited to snoop around for clues. The boys discover that the head forest ranger was the liaison between a gang of poachers and the 'Boss', a dealer who has placed an order for six rhino horns for a rich buyer.

After a series of exciting episodes, the boys outsmart the poachers and assist the rescue team to apprehend the criminals. Graphic descriptions of the manner in which the poachers first trap and then hack the rhino for its horn, and the intricate network surrounding the sale of the horns, serves as a strong plea for the conservation of wildlife.

In the International Year of the Child, 1979, CBT contributed with the incentive of more prizes and a Shankar's Gold Medal for outstanding books in the competition. The result that year revealed a new trend creeping in. *The Chandipur Jewels* by Nilima Sinha won the first prize. After unveiling poaching, this 'mystery' came as another welcome surprise—The highlights being the strong female character who participates actively in the adventure. *The Story of Panchami* by Abhijit Sengupta which got the second prize won the jury's hearts by its sensitivity:

You can't tame a migratory bird like the sea-gull, Asman Hawk, the bird-man, had said. But Panchami had been with Mithun for a year. . . Would she come back?

Come down, Panchami, come down, pleaded Mithun. The sea-gulls in the distance called out once again. As the sound faded, it was answered by a loud shriek. Panchami had made up her mind.

Yet another pace-setter that year was, *You and the Computer*, (first prize winner, non-fiction category) by Dr. Rajagopalan—an extremely informative book for children on the complex functioning and uses of a computer in the simplest possible language.

The year 1980 saw the introduction of a third category—picture books. That year nine manuscripts received prizes. They were: *Robin and the Hawk* by C.N. Bulsara (first prize, fiction category)—a fantasy of a little Robin who saves other birds from the predatory hawk.

*Trouble at Kolongijan* by Arup Kumar Dutta (second prize, adventure story) is about a young boy, Moina, who becomes a hero when he assists the police and the village council to apprehend some criminals who are determined to destroy the village by blowing up the river embankment.

*The Treasure Box* by Sarojini Sinha (third prize winner) was a story based on India's 1857 freedom struggle:

Though only fourteen, Govind was eager to do his bit for the country's freedom. He knew the sepoys were ready to ride to battle. But there was no one to lead them. Crestfallen and heart broken, Govind returned home to take care of his mother and



others. Their only savings were gold coins his father had thoughtfully hidden. But where had they disappeared?

Apart from installing patriotic feelings, the story recaptures the mood and spirit of that time.

In the non-fiction category, *Tipu Sultan* by Mona Malwani—won the second prize, while four prizes were awarded in the newly introduced picture books category.

Alaka Shankar won the first prize for her story, *My Muffy*, which portrayed warm relationship between a little girl and her stuffed doll.

Minnie P. Swami got the second prize for her story *My Wall*—an excellent depiction of family sharing and togetherness—A lonely boy draws a wall with a garden, tea table and party things to entertain himself. He invites his family to join in the play and they love it!

Pratibha Nath's, *Barber at the Zoo*, which won the third prize along with another, *Elephant that Ran Away*, by Shaiontoni Sinha, is a humorous fantasy. It recounts the exploits of Badlu, the barber, as he grooms his clients at the zoo. A chimp gets him into trouble by stealing the scissors and nicking the lion's tail. Yet, it is the chimp's quick wit that saves Badlu from the lion's fury. In this way, in barely three years, the CBT's goal of offering a judicious but delectable mix of fiction, non-fiction and picture books had been reached. The new trail it had blazed encouraged them to follow it up with similar other books. So the competition rules for the subsequent three years remained the same and the yield proved beyond doubt that adventure and mystery *per se* has an irresistible appeal. While satisfying this appeal, the adventure-cum-mystery book had a leavening of useful information on local customs, landscape and other characteristics, which the child reader could imbibe with ease inasmuch as the didactic element, being an integral part of the story, was incidental and not an obstructive imposition.

One manuscript which particularly stood out in this collection was *The Blind Witness*, a mystery, by Arup Kumar Dutta which won the second prize. A homage to the visually handicapped, the story echoes positive concern and not mere sympathy for the less fortu-

nate among us. Ramu was a witness to a cold-blooded murder. But Ramu was blind. Who would believe him? While the story was exciting, its main thrust was to illustrate that the handicapped should be treated with respect because they can overcome their shortcomings and far surpass the people who have all their faculties intact.

The following year, in 1983, *Our Scientists* by Dilip M. Salwi won the second prize (non-fiction). The merit of this manuscript lay in the fact that through the achievements of 47 scientists, the author traced India's contribution to science and technology from the Vedic civilization to the present times dispelling the image of India as a scientifically backward country.

In 1985 again there were many additions as far as prizes and categories were concerned. Where prizes went up from 6 to 25, the new categories introduced were: historical fiction, science fiction and short stories. The introduction of the science fiction category reflected CBT's endeavour to keep up with the times and opened up new avenues with exciting possibilities in the realm of scientific fantasy.

The second-prize winner in this category was an adventure set in outer space—*The Alien Planet* by Krishna Narayanan. A glimpse. . .

The creature twitched at the sudden change in temperature. Sooraj inspected it carefully. The thrill of discovery coursed through his vein like a drug. If he took this object back with him to planet Earth, he would become one of the immortals in the scientists Roll of Honour.

In the year 1985-86 CBT along with UNICEF held a National competition for writers to mark the Year of the Girl Child. The two categories, picture books and fiction, now had a specified theme—the portrayal of boys and girls as equals. The response was overwhelming. Four manuscripts out of the lot were selected for prizes. *Once Upon a Forest* by Kavary Bhatt won the first prize. It is an adventure story about a group of children who get lost in a forest. How they tide over one crisis after another, makes it exciting reading. Needless to say, the boys and girls were superbly matched.

The second prize winner, *The Exquisite Balance* by Poile Sengupta, is about a brother and sister (twins)—Suprabha's ambition in life is to play football, but her twin brother thinks football is sacred and only boys can play it. Here the author has taken the help of an alien from outer space who finally declares the truth—the boy has a gender, while the mind has none. A boy or a girl are two ends of a perfect scale—The Exquisite Balance. In the picture book category, *Mamani's Adventure* by Mitra Phukan won the first prize, and *The Girl Who Was Not Built Right* by Krishna Narayanan, the second prize. In *Mamani's Adventure*, a girl is the main character and she is only seven. How she manages to save a patch of sugarcane from a herd of elephants, which is so valuable to the family, is where her genius comes in.

In *The Girl Who Was Not Built Right* the author projected another novel idea. She made the girl into a robot who can perform only those functions that she is programmed to carry out . . . till there is a crisis and she is helpless. Overnight the wires and parts are changed and finally the robot can do all the things the boy can do. In fact now he needs to learn a few things from her! In the 1987 and 1988 competitions as well, CBT introduced further variety by way of humour, heritage and culture, short plays and dramas; all with positive results. Once again Arup Kumar Dutta won the first prize in the general fiction for his entry, *Smack*. *Smack* is an exciting fictional story about the drug racket which has invaded and destroyed so many homes the world over. The author deserves praise for deftly handling the subject which has so much social relevance today. The author takes the reader into the back alleys and little lanes in which children and adults alike are a part of the chain—'Two poor boys, Gullu, a *dhabha* worker and Ravi, a shoe-shine boy, accidentally get involved with a police informer. The police seek Gullu's help in identifying the drug-king. In a rare display of courage, the boys succeed in helping the police to nab the entire gang.

*The New Boy of Dovedales* by Mathew Panamkat (second prize, science fiction) was another trail blazer. It is the story of an extra-terrestrial invasion on earth, the targets being all six-year-old exceptionally gifted children. Sumitra, the new boy at Dovedales School is six as well, with an I.Q. of 320. Will he escape the drag-net?

The discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization pushed Indian history and culture far back into history. *The Secrets of the Indus Valley* by Dr. Rajagopalan which won the first prize in the non-fiction/information category unravels some of these secrets which even now baffle archaeologists. If the above enigma is challenging to experts, what about the next one which won the second prize—*Lusooma*—a 31st century science fiction by Mathew Panamkat: New Year's Day in the great Indian Federation opens with the murder of the keeper of the Old World Museum in a land where evil and disease are alien words. Are the people of Creston, a neighbouring meteorite responsible? Sudan and Sarita investigate and in the process discover the Secret of the legendary Dr. Lusooma.

Encouraged by the overwhelming response in the various themes they had introduced year after year, in 1989, CBT tied up with the World Wild Life Fund for Nature—India, Delhi U.T. Committee and jointly organized a competition, this time for writers and illustrators on 'Our Environment'. They felt since children are "the keepers of the world" an awareness in them of the importance of nature conservation could still save the world.

Again the response was overwhelming, and the results yielded a rich harvest of manuscripts. *A Forest in the City* by Kumaran Sathasivam, which won the first prize, recounts the experience of a scholar in the idyllic atmosphere of his institute placed amidst flora and fauna.

In the Natural History section *The Shami Tree* by A.K. Srikumar won the first prize. This is an adventure story set in the Great Indian desert. The hero is a rebel fugitive in pre-Independence India. During a hunt he gets acquainted with young Ratni, a plucky Bishnoi girl, who does not allow to kill his prey, but is willing to give her life instead, as is the creed of her tribe. Thereafter he is invited to a Bhisnoi village and gets a chance to observe their life first hand and play a role in the affairs of the village, albeit for a short period.

*Where has the Forest Gone?* by Rupa Gupta (second prize winner) is about illegal tree felling and deforestation. Raju and Babli chance upon it on a midnight escapade in the forest of Sonapur. Together with Dr. Karuna Ray, their village doctor, they are instrumental in preventing the owner of the forest, Chote Thakur, from signing

away invaluable property. An evocative story relevant to the saving the environment.

In the short story category, 15 short stories were selected for prizes. They have now been put together in a collection—*The Land and other Stories*. The stories project lucidly the importance of cherishing our environment and the dangers of neglecting it.

The information here would not be complete if we did not mention the illustrators' contribution in this competition. In keeping with the theme, artist B.G.Varma, participated with pictorial depictions of 'Onam'—a festival of nature celebrated in Kerala, proving yet again that as far as the subject for children's literature is concerned, the sky is the limit!

While the attempt at diversification of publications was being pursued with vigour, the time tested old favourites were not forgotten. The ever-green *Panchatantra* stories found their way into a deluxe compendium, which proved to be a hot favourite and has already gone into several editions. As a sequel more popular literature like folktales and classics were put together in hardcover editions.

With the growing importance of picture books for children's smallest age-group, quite a few have been published throughout the years. Many more are on the anvil.

A couple of years ago, CBT launched another series—*Remembering our Leaders*. With the freedom movement having blurred the memory of years of freedom, even grandparents hardly remember the names of nationalist heroes to tell their grandchildren. Subramaniam B. Lal, Lajpat Rai and many others tend to be static images from pages of history books or statues in public parks.

In an attempt to remedy this, the series were introduced. Each book has been conceived as a useful input to enable children to imbibe the ideas and values which the great men and women of India contributed to India's awakening. Beginning with Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the series is to stretch to present time. These are not formal biographies. Each book presents the role played by the leaders of thought and action, the ideas and sacrifices which the children should know. An effort is made to impart brevity and quality to the volumes.

A parallel publication programme covering all the themes

tioned so far is going on for Hindi and Bengali languages as well. In 1987 CBT announced an annual Hindi Competition and in 1991, a Bengali Competition. The response has been promising. The Trust is now equipped to handle far more original Hindi and Bengali manuscripts without limiting the programme to translations.

The CBT's initiative has paid. It has helped them to cast their net wide and gather a rich and assorted catch. The new trail that has blazed has encouraged other publishers to follow it with similar other books. While satisfying the children's appeal for more adventures and mysteries, other categories have also received attention. And with more and more publishers setting out in this direction and the financial benefit for authors becoming attractive, there is a growing awareness among writers as well of the possibilities available in the field of children's literature.

But what comes as a pleasant surprise are the many science fiction books available in the market today. One writer who is valiantly trying to build excitement among children on a subject that is low in popularity, is Dilip M. Salwi and his books on science. Ratna Sagar has published some of them: *The Robots are Coming*, *Alien Encounters*, *The Aliens have Landed* and *Meet the Planets*.

*Mr. Sun Takes a Holiday*, *In Search of Water*, *Madame Air wants a Change* and *Meet the Soil Fairy* are a set of four picture books under a common head—*Meet the 4 Elements*. Here the author has personified air, sun (fire), water and soil and woven quaint tales around them to make children realize how vitally important the elements are for survival.

*Meet the Planets* is a thrilling journey through space during which you meet the nine planets and their satellites. The other three: *The Robots are Coming*, *Alien Encounter* and *The Aliens have Landed* are stories of visitors from outer space which acquaint children with space science, astrophysics and futuristic technology. Besides the above, there is, *Inventions that Made History* by Publications Division, *Great Discoveries* by Frank Educational Aids, *The Story of Zero*, *Superconductivity* and *Our Scientists* published by CBT.

If Dilip M. Salwi has done a commendable job of enlarging the scientific horizons of a child's mind, Ruskin Bond, through his writings remind the younger generation, the inheritors of the earth,

of the denuding process of the beautiful planet earth. In his books he communicates his extraordinary empathy with nature in sensitive prose and intense verse. One of his many books, *Our Trees Still grow in Dehra* published by Puffin India won the Sahitya Akademi award for the authors "tender miniatures in prose". Almost everywhere in his writings, Bond has celebrated / extolled the "endurance of nature against the transience of humanity".

Another popular writer of children's books is Sigrun Srivastava. Somehow she knows what children want to read about. She has the wonderful ability to get under the skin of her child characters which makes their feelings, problems so true and credible. In *No Time to Fear and Other Stories* published by Publications Division, there is a whole range of characters you can find in your neighbourhood. The tales are of children displaying unusual courage in harrowing circumstances. *The Mysterious Neighbour and Other Stories* by Harper Collins is another readable collection of hers. It deals with problems like how to make friends, temporary separation from parents, a terminally sick parent, how to assert yourself and make it in a man's world.

In conclusion, therefore, Indian children's literature today has considerable variety. The authors have explored almost every category ranging from myths and classics—retold to adventure, fantasy, stories of realism, both historical and biographical. Their approach to the themes is in keeping with the direct approach adults are using nowadays in their relationship with their children. And with children absorbing more and more of the adult problems, the 'happily-ever-after' tag has been replaced by a more realistic rounding off.

Come to think of it, all this has been achieved in a small span of less than fifty years after India's Independence. The output, admittedly is low compared to some other countries, but if we remind ourselves of our motto—Only the best is good enough for children—we can proudly say we have worked hard, very hard indeed to establish indigenous children's literature in the literary map of the world. And we are happy with the results.

# **Iren's Books in India: Interview**

Li Rao

India can be said to be the cradle of children's literature. The *Panchatantra*, the *Jatakas*, the *Hitopadesha*, *Kathasaritsagara*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and other classics have been sources of stories for children's authors all over the world. Apart from the classics, India has a very rich oral tradition which has inspired many books. These have the essential qualities of simple charm and imagination. It is something to be remembered by a character or a moral or a lesson those who created them were not only remarkable story-tellers but they also seemed to know how to communicate with children.

It is only natural that in India these stories have been told a myriad of times by a myriad authors. More than fifty per cent of what has been written are the retold versions of these tales. There seems to be an anxiety on the part of the authors to preserve the fountainhead of folktales which are not only ingenious but have the cherished, traditional Indian values.

It is true that folktales are timeless. They contain, in the words of Charles Leland, "morality and truth that are everlasting". Folk literature preserves the wit and wisdom of ages to be passed on to the future generations. Its form is always simple, its views of the world uncomplicated and its characters archetypal.



After our Independence there was a sense of hurry in our values and in our standards. There was a rapid and almost complete reorientation of our thinking. New goals had to be set up. The political awakening was followed by a cultural renaissance. The Indian identity became all-important, and Indianness acquired new dimensions and significance. Even the educational system needed to be re-examined. The school textbooks had to be rewritten. The work was very vast and not easy. The National Council of Educational Research and Training was set up by the Government for planning and publishing new textbooks for schools. Today this organization (popularly known by its acronym NCERT), has near monopoly in publishing textbooks as they are compulsory for all Government-aided schools.

The rapid change in our values and priorities resulted in a conflict of ideas and ideals in many things we did. This was reflected in children's books too. On one hand there was the anxiety to assert our Indianness and national pride, make children feel proud of their country and their national heritage and on the other, the consciousness that advancement of scientific knowledge and temper were important if India wanted to be a part of the brave new world.

It is fascinating to look back now and think of the unbelievable spurt of activities in all spheres of life which swept through the country during the early post-Independence years.

The old classics were revived with the awareness of the great treasure they had to offer. There was eagerness to project their old world values which ensured security and justice, the universal virtues of truth, love and compassion for fellow beings, and the ultimate victory of good over evil.

At the same time, a new society was emerging under the influence of the liberated Western thinking. Women, for instance, had acquired a new status. Their equal rights were being recognized. The laws were being re-written. A new, emancipated Indian woman was emerging fast. It was important to project this 'new woman' in children's books too. Stories upholding the old image of the obsequious woman were now rejected by more enlightened people. A woman's place was no more confined to the kitchen or the four walls of the home. It was, therefore, important to exercise discerning

judgement even in the selection of stories for retelling. They had to be relevant to the changing society. Balancing modernity, pragmatism, scientific thinking and the old values and idealism was not easy.

In this rather uncertain state of things, children's literature had to take a back bench. Not much was written and published that was of great significance until the advent of Children's Book Trust in the late fifties. It was the late Shankar Pillai, the founder of the Children's Book Trust, who gave children's books a new concept and importance. Within a short time from the establishment of the Trust, children's books became a subject for new thinking and discussion. The response Shankar received from the Government and the people was amazing. The country seemed to have been waiting for something like this to happen. New talent was drawn from all directions. I had the good fortune of working with Shankar in the early, formative years of the Children's Book Trust, and shared with him all the thrill and excitement of witnessing the coming up of an institution which the only one of its kind even today. Of course, Shankar received maximum support from the Government, as Jawaharlal Nehru loved children and keenly felt the need for an institution devoted to the production of good books for them.

Shankar considered children as those who deserved nothing but the best. To him it was a crime to give them anything that was indifferently put together. He realized the importance of skill development without which it would not be possible to realize the dream of creating aesthetically produced books. He organized regular workshops and training courses for illustrators. Some of the young artists, who received training in these workshops, like Pulak Biswas, and M.A. Jomraj, are front-ranking illustrators today.

More than anything else, Shankar put publishing of children's books on the map of Indian publishing. Some enterprising publishers tried to emulate the Children's Book Trust, but could not sustain their efforts.

With the launching of its very popular and successful series *Nehru Bal Pustakalaya* (Nehru Library for Children), in 1970, the National Book Trust, an autonomous organization under the Ministry of Human Resources Development, became another major publisher

of children's books, perhaps the biggest in the country today. Besides publishing for all age-groups—from pre-school to 14 years—the Trust publishes in 13 languages. Most of the titles are first published in English and later translated into twelve major Indian languages. Besides being well illustrated and well produced, the books are moderately priced as the Trust is a non-profit making organization. Their publications have filled a great void. Being both good and inexpensive, their books are in great demand, specially for bulk purchase by libraries.

There are over two thousand established publishers in India but only about 50 publish exclusively for children in all languages. For others who publish children's books, it is only a peripheral activity.

About 500 new titles for children are published every year in India in all the languages put together. This is rather inadequate considering there are over half a million elementary schools and the total number of school-going children is about 95 million. There are however several dedicated publishers who have been bringing out quality books for children on a wide range of subjects in Indian languages and English, but the overall effort is not commensurate with the ever-increasing demand for suitable reading material for children.

In the regional languages, specially in the areas where the literacy rate is very low, books are printed in small editions. Even in Hindi which is spoken by the largest number of people in India, the print run of a new children's title is not more than 5000. And the lower the print run the higher is the cost and, consequently, the price. Publishers plead that the distribution cost is very high. Good artwork is expensive, and today even children's authors demand higher royalty. Even good publishers cannot depend on sales through retail outlets alone. Most of them look up to bulk purchase by Government departments and libraries.

Among Indian languages, Bangla undoubtedly stands heads and shoulders above others. Bengalis have a tradition of buying and reading books. Eminent authors have written for children in Bangla. Satyajit Ray wrote and illustrated his own books. He created the loveable Feluda. Children of Bengal grow up with Feluda unravelling all kinds of mysteries. Another character Ghanada, loved by all

teenagers, was created by Premendra Mitra. Several other eminent authors like Mahashveta Devi, Leela Majumdar and Ashapurna Devi have created unforgettable stories for boys and girls. Books in Bangla are very well illustrated and, what is more, they are moderately priced.

Marathi too has some excellent children's authors, and is specially noteworthy for plays for children. Guruji, a household name in Maharashtra, wrote *Shyamchi Ayi* (Shyam's Mother) which has become a classic. Tamhankar created Gotya and Bhagwat Faster Fenny—the boy who wanted to do everything faster than others. Ratnakar Matkari, Vijay Tendulkar, and Sai Paranjpye have written excellent plays for children. Like Bengalis. Maharashtrians too have a well developed reading habit, and like Bangla again, children's literature in Marathi is very Indian in character, and has not been much influenced by the West.

As I said earlier, other languages still are in the process of developing their children's literature. Western Classics, including Hans Christian Andersen and Grimm have been translated extensively. Although translating from English is quite common, translating children's books from one Indian language into others does not seem to be much favoured.

Children's books in English in India stand apart. They are not only better written, and illustrated, they are better produced too. Children's books in English by Indian authors are obviously inspired by English and American authors. Enid Blyton has inspired several authors like Swapna Dutta who wrote the highly popular and successful Juneli series, published by Harper and Collins. Authors of children's books in English have a different readership—their target reader is the child from the upper strata of society, convent educated, in whose family English is the main language of communication. Children who go to English medium schools and belong to the rich or the upper middle class are more favourably placed. Not only can their parents afford to buy books for them, they are more aware of the importance of reading outside the classrooms. Some of the older writers like Lila Majumdar and Manoj Das still try to retain the old world charm in their stories, but the younger authors are more conscious of the changing reading habit of the modern child

who is exposed to TV and other media of entertainment and information.

Authors in English are experimenting with new ideas and themes keeping the modern child's needs and expectations in mind. They seem to be perfectly at home writing about the upper middle class child but they do not succeed in striking the right note or creating the right ambience when dealing with characters from the poorer class. But that does not diminish the importance of their contribution.

There is a growing awareness about the importance of ecology, and it has become a popular subject. Ruskin Bond whose name tops the list of children's writers in English, has been involved with the subject for a long time, and has written some excellent books. Writing mystery stories is Arup Kumar Dutta's forte. His *Kaziranga Trail* (published by Children's Book Trust (CBT) is one of the best books written on the subject. It is an absorbing adventure story, seeking to make young readers more aware of the environment. Other notable books written by Dutta are *Smack* (CBT) *The Poisoned Pool* (Ratna Sagar) and the *Story of Tea* (National Book Trust).

Writing mystery stories is becoming very popular with children's writers, as they are conscious of their popularity with children. Several authors have tried to writing mystery stories with varying degrees of success. Not many however have tried science fiction. Among those who have, Dalip Salwi's *Robots Are Coming* and *The Story of Zero* are among the most entertaining.

Margaret Bhatta a very gifted author, has been writing for children for a considerable time. *Evil Empire* is her recent book. Sigrun Srivastava, a German married to an Indian and living in India, is among the most popular writers for children.

Puffin Books and Harper Collins have started bringing out attractive books and thereby, enriched children's literature in English in India.

There is more emphasis on illustrations and good printing as books in English have to compete with imported books. There are some excellent and much sought after illustrators of children's books today—Jagdish Joshi, Pulak Biswas, Subir Roy, Mrinal Mitra—to mention some.

The invasion of television has influenced a child's life in many

ways. His reading preferences have been affected. He needs books which can compete with the exciting serials shown on the TV. Authors are more conscious of the need for children's books to be direct, less moralizing, and close to real-life situations. This may be seen mostly in the books in English, Bangla and Marathi. There is more openness and greater variety.

In the last two decades, the developing world has faced a major communication onslaught. The speed at which information can be communicated today is so breathtaking. Countries which are yet to have an industrial revolution are already experiencing repercussions of the information and communication revolutions. India is a country of contrasts and extremes. The people are at various stages of development. The ancient and the very modern co-exist. The space age has taken over even before the dark age has receded into history.

It is strange to talk about the impact of TV and other electronic media on books in a country where a good number of people living in remote areas have limited access to books. Countries which have not yet achieved complete literacy are facing post-literacy problems.

In this information age, gathering and communicating information has inevitable become a major preoccupation with people. The impact of this can be seen on children's books as well. Today the market is flooded with quiz books and other kinds of informative and general knowledge books which find favour not only with children and their parents, but with publishers as well.

This decade has been good for children's book in India. The National Centre for Children's Literature has been established by the National Book Trust for the promotion of children's books. The Centre's agenda includes workshops for authors and illustrators. Thankfully, more effort is going into the production of children's books now which have acquired new dimensions in face with competition with the powerful audio-visual media. This is what Subir Roy, the Art Director of Children's Book Trust said "Books will have to be very different if they have to survive. They will have to be more gimmicky, with attractive packaging, and illustrators will have to play a much more crucial role."

## **The Role of Mythology in Children's Literature**

*Balashouri Reddy*

The art of story-telling is, perhaps, as old as human civilization. In the spirit of constant inquiry into the phenomenon of nature, in the effort to seek casualty, the bare simplicity of questions (Why? Wherefore? Whereto?) constitutes the basic brickwork on which stands the earliest edifice of narrations—primitive, romantic, literary.

It begins invariably with a sentence which sets off immense possibilities—"Once Upon a Time, there was a . . .," followed by the inevitable query, "What happened next?" The family elder hands down to the tale-hungry child a rich fare of traditional narratives interspersed with folk-songs; he talks of kings and queens, handsome princes and beautiful princesses, fairy tale fables, mythological tales, legends and historical romances. As the child grows up, the narratives change their style and appeal, and emerge as adult literature. Childhood fantasy, godly heroes and demonic villains metamorphose into socio-ethical abstractions.

The transformation of the child world into adult world is a gradual and subtle passage through a complicated gamut. Factors more than one have worked hand in hand to weave the complete fabric of culture and heritage, values and morality and a strong sense of belongingness as an individual unit to the societal whole of which he

is a part. Mythology plays a significant role in the growth of the human mind, not only on a mere individual level, but also on the level of a greater whole through the ages. Every civilization has its own repertoire of mythological tales—with gods and goddesses, the endless wars between God and satan, the dual politics of the sacred and the profane, the concept of heaven and hell, good and evil. It is interesting to note the other branches of story-telling which, have been mentioned earlier, viz., legends, fables, *Jatakas*, parables etc. all have more or less developed along the basic idea of the triumph of good over evil. But this apparently oversimplified definition is indeed a very wide frame. Its parameter includes a complete spectrum of rich imaginations, emotions, the art of story-telling, even the rudiments of more serious philosophical enquiry, the concept of causality, all of which merges to constitute a meaningful social existence.

Mythology in the first place, is a collection of tales—very hearable and very readable. A wide-eyed child follows and absorbs the adventurous tales of the hero, surmounting adversities, tribulations and emerging as the glorious conqueror. The hero is always good, handsome, brave and righteous. The heroine is beautiful of form and mind, an epitome of all that is best among women. This imaginary world is populated by gods, fairies and ethereal creatures. On the other end of the *dramatis personae* figure the devils, *asuras* and the wicked evil men. They have to be subjugated or annihilated. The backdrop of the action is a place where the trees bear jewelled flowers and honeyed fruits. In this paradise on earth, no one is poor and everyone is happy. Sometimes when this splendid balance is threatened by evil and good is challenged, the hero comes forward for the protection of mankind and re-establishes the kingdom of Heaven or the Ram Rajya. The child's imagination is populated by these miracle figures, he gets acquainted with them through the channel of the traditional stories. The moral of the story is always the same—the betterment of the individual. This lesson, which in the normal course, would have come to him through abstruse precepts, in stern do's and don'ts is encapsulated as an integral part of romantic story-telling.

The psychological relevance of this type of literature can be



interpreted as a mysterious and enchanting journey through our growing years. The child in his process of development transforms his immediate mundane world into a world of make-belief and magic. The richer his source of inspiration, the richer are his fanciful inventions. The sentimental strata of his mind begins to undergo a change. He starts to grasp the implications of happiness and sadness of the adult world especially emotions such as love and anger, frustration of failure and the joy of success. He identifies himself with the characters of the romantic tales, and feels deeply the pangs of separation of a fond father (Dashratha), for his banished son (Rama). In fact, when later in life he faces similar situations, he might already have acquired a certain equanimity. The importance and depth of these tales as a strong and cathartic agent is indeed profound.

In every civilization, mythological literature is a rich vehicle of cultural heritage of respective civilizations. More so in the Indian context particularly because the myths have been consolidated and poetized into literary epics. Unlike some other magnificent world epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are also intertwined closely with the religious ethos of the country. Here, one grows up breathing the atmosphere of a religio-social, cultural and historical past through these tales whether it be in the oral tradition or in the form of written literature. In fact, practically every Indian language has children's classics based on the stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, *Jataka-tales*, *Hitopadesha*, *Betal-katha* and tales from *Purana*.

*Purana* tales in particular, offer a rich fare of anecdotes where imagination and history merge to emerge as fascinating allegories. This is an age-old literature. The inspiration behind its creation was perhaps to make human life complete and meaningful and purify it. Its ultimate aim was to dispense practical knowledge for the betterment of the society through stories—with a stress on reward and retribution for every action. *Puranas* which are eighteen in number are said to contain five characteristics, creation, its annihilation, account and genealogy of different dynasties and its transition. *Puranas* need to be followed by adequate commentaries to be fully understood. Different *Puranas* enunciate and then solve different issues related to life and society. For example, *Garuda Purana* deals

with the precept of the creation of the world, heaven and hell, sin and its expiation. A complete code of conduct from birth to death is formulated in detail. It speaks of universal with a very broad connotation. In short, every small detail of the role of a human being in a complicated social atmosphere has been analyzed through the medium of story-telling.

These are works of high literary merit and of great aesthetic value. The imagination of the reader and particularly so, of a young reader is kindled and activated through this medium. In fact, so rich is this source of inspiration that many great writers have drawn again and again from the eternal springhead of this Sacred Well. For example in Bengali, Upendra Kishore Raychoudhuri's (the grandfather of Satyajit Ray) *Chotoder Ramayan* and *Chotoder Mahabharat* stand out as children's classics. Though others of great merit followed, like Sukumar Roy's *Nonsensical Verses*, the ever-delightful folktales of Dakshina Ranjan Majumdar told in his unimitable style, Abanindranath Tagore's *Khurer Putul* and others stand out as masterpieces. *Chanda Mama* the notable children's magazine instituted in 1946, appearing in Telugu and Tamil first, and then being published in 12 Indian languages follows the tradition of presenting childworthy tales drawing freely from mythological sources. Perhaps, every young student has gone through the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* by C. Rajagopalachari. The young reader growing up to an adult will go back repeatedly to these tales consciously or subconsciously and use them as ready references in his everyday life; chaste as Sita, upright as Rama, truthful as Yudhishtira. The seeds of oft-read, oft-heard, oft-repeated stories have taken a deep root in his socio-cultural ethos. It is not mere knowledge kept in an isolated compartment of his brain. It is as living as the air he breathes. It pulsates in his veins as life blood. It has become an extended part of his personality as any other art or skill practised since childhood and incorporated in his system. His frame of reference will crystallize some day and give a definition to his faith, his belief, his moral convictions and social justice.

An accusing finger has sometimes been levelled at the relevance of the dose of the flight of imagination injected into the child's mind through these tales of fantasy. Modern thinkers often question

whether it is psychologically right to bring up a growing mind on the nourishment of unreal, fanciful facts. It is definitely a moot point to be considered. But, on the other hand, would denying imagination in the process of mental growth not make his mind incomplete and inadequate? A balance has to be struck somewhere along the growth process. The answer perhaps lies in the child-mind itself. The child, as he grows up, goes through a gradual and constant process of acquiring facts and eliminating those which are not practically useful to him, in a natural way. But, that little extra-colouring of imaginative fancy, which survives the process of growing up, makes him into a complete human being. In the sheath of such traits lie, perhaps, the seeds of poetry and of the arts, compassion and bravery, the ability to identify with nature and cosmos.

The mythological tales are a admixture of good and evil, beauty and the beast. Yet, invariably, the positive always triumphs over the negative, beauty and peace emerge victorious and the nemesis never remains unexplained. Today the form of the children's literature which is taking over and edging out what was traditional, is comics and thrillers replete with prolonged details of violence and bloodshed. There is victory surely for the superman but in that victory there are no traces of idealism and the humanism of yesteryear's literature. Nowhere does one see the emergence of Lord Krishna with his philosophy of *Gita* on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. No tragic Hector walks the parapets of Troy moaning the meaningless violence of the Trojan War. Philosophy and catharsis, wonderment and beauty have been squeezed out. Is there not a sense of impoverishment on that account ? Sometimes one is left to wonder.

The inclusion and proper use of mythological tales do not however vouch the fact that the child will grow up into a being rich in healthy imagination, fully aware of his culture and heritage, conscious of the responsibilities society expects of him. One can only say that it is a salutary beginning and one which will proliferate later into an entity desirable by the society and worthy of it.

# 8

## The Reading Habit

*Parents and teachers complain that their children have stopped reading. Many blame the television for this. Almost every urban home in India today is invaded by Star TV. There was a time when no one stirred out on Sunday mornings when Ramayana and Mahabharata were screened. Old and young alike, irrespective of their religious affiliations or beliefs, were stirred with the passions of the great epics. Today this is replaced five days a week with the newfound middle class obsession with the intrigues of the Bold and Beautiful and Santa Barbara. These have become conversation pieces in kitty parties and in schools.*

*The television is a reality today and with cable, the number of channels is bound to increase. What effect this will have on the minds of our children is still a matter of conjecture. Books will increasingly be replaced by the video cassette. Some day, the video cassette may well enter the classrooms and school libraries.*

*This invasion from the skies is a reality. It is a fact that we have to live with. Censorship has its own hidden agenda and has never been known to succeed. In any case, most governments in the developing world would not have the economic wherewithal to block this invasion from the skies.*

*It is the cultural fallout that worries educationists and families. "Western values will now invade our homes", we seem to say. But what a Western value is itself debatable. Is sex and violence alien to Indians? Are our popular Hindi films any different?*

*What is however likely to have a far-reaching impact is the fact that Hollywood films are now being dubbed into almost every major Indian language. Aladdin is available in Telugu, apart from Hindi. This was not so with books. Indeed, for quite some time, Jonathan Swift, Robert Louis Stevenson and Enid Blyton was read only by those who had the advantage of an English-medium education. Today, Aladdin can reach even the most remote village in India.*

*Reproduced below are three articles or viewpoints on the reading habit. The video revolution is hardly likely to totally replace the written word but it is surely going to become increasingly popular among children.*

**Editor**

## I

In India, the generation growing up in the fifties and sixties were reared on a diet of British fiction that dated back some twenty years. The books admirably set out the beliefs and values of the British establishment in the thirties: behind the buns and lemonade of the Famous Five and the dashing adventures of Biggles were a coherent and easily decodable set of attitudes that reflected the worldview of Great Britain a decade before the Second World War. These attitudes were perhaps readily identifiable to English speaking, Indian, upper middle class children who had the greatest access to such reading material. But the amazing thing is, that despite the passage of thirty years, despite the entry of innovative, relevant and inexpensive literature brought out by such bodies as the Children's Book Trust and the National Book Trust in English and in regional languages, reading habits among this class of Indian children have hardly changed at all.

Enid Blyton, for instance, dealt with the codes and symbols of upper middle class British children who were confidently expecting to run an Empire when they grew up. Thus, the homilies on team spirit, on an English Sense of Honour, on the importance of obedience to a clearly defined leadership were entirely appropriate to a generation hoping (vainly, as it turned out) to pick up their solar topees and head for Kenya, Burma and other points East of Suez on reaching adulthood.

The popular culture reflected in Enid Blyton's books, for instance, showed a society with its class groupings firmly in place. Julian, Dick, George and Anne (of the Famous Five series) belonged to the then socially secure and financially entrenched professional category which could send their children to boarding schools secure in the knowledge that all the appropriate codes of their class would be properly inculcated. The children in Blyton's books were well aware of their social position *vis-a-vis* village children, domestic staff and the lower ranks of the law and order machinery. Criminals, in such fiction, were not just beyond the moral pale, but usually beyond the social pale as well. Foreigners, that is non-British people, were always funny, with a slightly shaky sense of morality and a

inconquerable proneness to frivolity. Take, for instance, the portraits of foreign pupils in Blyton's boarding school sagas: Claudine (French) and Zelda (American) hated playing lacrosse because it ruined their complexion. Blyton's unstated conclusion that these nationalities were incapable of ruling the world, could scarcely be clearer.

Gender roles, too, were clearly defined: the girls made the cocoa and washed the plates, while the boys did some serious tracking. Authority was absolute: parents, headmistresses and police officers of the rank of Inspector were kind, resolute and always the canons of political correctness has only touched the surface: what does it matter if a golliwog's colour is left unchanged? The whole of Blyton's oeuvre is actually based on the most unreconstructed set of notions.

The point is the lessons of Malory Towers and the daredevilry of the Five Findouters *et al.* were consolidating the view of a secure, seemingly unchangeable class-based society. And Indian children, checking out these books from the libraries of their schools, were—and, unfortunately, still are—drinking it all in. As this age group grows older, they turn to two other staples: on one hand they read what are effectively continuations of the Blyton credo: Agatha Christie's mysteries and P.G. Wodehouse's novels; on the other are the enormous variety of American comics which spell out an even more powerful, if marginally different, message.

Agatha Christie's view of the universe changed little since she published her first book, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, just after the First World War. Here, too, foreigners (Hercule Poirot excepted) are of dubious integrity and usually referred to as "Dagos", whom, apparently, all "full blooded Englishmen" long to kick. Her early works often alluded to international Jewish conspiracies to take over the world; a world in which housemaids and lower orders generally, are unreliable and apt to lose their heads under pressure, but crusty old colonels and other-worldly vicars are always right. The novels of P.G. Wodehouse are, of course, nothing but a celebration of the English landed classes: they may be amiable dimwits, but their right to their enviable position is never questioned and indeed the picture is of an endearingly eccentric, privileged, golden world of ivy covered castles, vintage cars and faithful retainers.

My point is that two generations of urban, literate, post-Indepen-

dence Indians have taken all this in without much questioning. The only competition to all this Anglophile class glorifying nostalgia came from the brasher, but nonetheless very alluring, tradition of American comics. There was nothing nostalgic about Archie, Superman or the Phantom. Here were heroes dedicated to saving the American Way of Life from nasty Cold War types who questioned the merits of capitalism, family values and the free availability of ice cream sodas.

The messages were powerful codes which sought, through the medium of vivid colours, simple conversations and the fullsome use of onomatopoeia (Thump!!, Crash!!, Kerboom!!, etc.), to sell a system—successfully, I think — to the impressionable young. It was coherent and comprehensive: The Man of Steel guarded the skies so that Archie and his fellow students at Riverdale High could go to school proms, meet at the soda fountain and pursue wholesome girls, while Dennis the Menace bothered Mr Wilson with winsome pranks in their clean, all white neighbourhood and Richie Rich's father fulfilled the American Dream of rags to riches. Meanwhile, The Phantom, Mandrake and the space-based Justice League of America subdued subversive, anti-American elements in the jungles of Africa, the South Seas, the outer rim of the galaxy and so on.

The fight goes on and has been joined by the even more powerful medium of television. Attractively packaged programmes for the young from cartoons about special cats to the tribulations of Canadian teenagers at Junior High School to MTV unplugged and — amazingly — the World Wrestling Federation (this last is very, very popular among the eight to eleven age group), all, with apparent innocence, posit a particular consciousness about the state of the world which is all too easily absorbed by children.

Censorship has never achieved anything. The aim should not be to hermeneutically seal off children from such influences (even if it could be done) but to promote, somehow, the equally attractive alternatives. It is not that they do not exist: the last Book Fair in New Delhi was overflowing with imaginative, attractively produced works for Indian children. To take just two random examples: Swapna Datta's *Juneli at St Avila's* (Harper Collins) is basically a Malory Towers clone, but starring Poonam, Harbinder and the

redoubtable Mother Benedicta; or Shankar's enchanting narrative about growing up in the south (*Life With Grandfather*, CBT). The talent, the production skills, the wide appeal are all there. Surely our children deserve better than the outdated, moth-eaten, hand-me-down literature they subsist on today?

*Ranjana Sengupta*

## II

A decade or two ago, simple pleasures like reading—not necessarily one's textbooks or business reports—writing—not always the answers to examination questions—and talking—not often shop—helped men and women sail through life's journey without a care. The passion for reading was kindled very early in life. When mothers and grandmothers even fathers and grandfathers—told children stories of kings and queens and of their subjects, curiosity was tickled.

As much as one may be tempted to blame the quickened pace of life for the way the reading habit threatens to disappear, one suspects that it has more to do with the system of education that leaves very little time for anything other than cramming. How many schools actually encourage their students to peep into the lives of *Oliver Twist* or *Ivanhoe*? How many institutions put their heart and soul into teaching Shakespeare or Shaw? How many of them ask their pupils to read aloud verses from Shelley or Keats? A worse culprit has been television, which has not only pushed people away from words, but has gone about making this planet a dull place, by cutting out some beautiful aspects of our character, imagination and day-dreaming.

When a few of Conan Doyle's novels like *Sherlock Holmes* were shown on TV children were disappointed, for they had seen something else in their mind's eye while they read him.

If people do not read as much as they used to, they do not write as much or even converse as much. The art of reading, the art of writing and the art of conversation seem to have virtually passed away with time.



The little TV box has also been guilty of interrupting conversation. Do people talk at all when they are together for a meal? Chats at dinner — even over breakfast — were such an integral part of everyday existence that issues were discussed and debated. Even social conversation has taken a beating with the advent of multi-media channels.

Reading for pleasure was immensely popular, and age was no barrier to this. Classics, adventure, mystery, romance, philosophy and psychology drew the young and the old into a kind of timelessness that was so comforting and relaxing.

A mind dulled by lack of reading and talking can hardly be expected to indulge in an art such as writing. Diaries could describe something as trivial as the weather or as momentous as freedom at midnight. Letters painted graphic accounts of life and living. But the inventions of science — long distance telephone dialling, facsimile and now E mail—have pushed this art of penning thoughts (as well as preserving them for posterity or as treasured memory) into oblivion. So books are also becoming rarer, these days.

Life's little pleasures have all but gone, and even a sequel cannot do much to bring them back.

This is true all over the world today except in Russia and Japan. Unless a campaign for reading, is taken up on a war footing, the reading habit will sink into oblivion. One can only expect a nation of Gascons (as in *Beauty and the Beast*) in the next century! I hope some people at least will read this article!

*Y.G. Parthasarathi*

### III

The readership habits among those children fortunate enough to have been given a literary education are changing, particularly amongst the English speaking, privileged section of society. Now, more than ever before, these children are subjected to a plethora of images in their own homes. Newspapers, magazines, advertisements, radio, Hindi TV channels, the film industry, video cassettes, and latterly Star TV produce thousands of images which in days gone by, would not have been available to their parent's generation.

These images are fuelling the children's thirst for knowledge and explanation, and they are beginning to question and seek out information on a variety of subjects. Whether it be about communalism, film stars, computers, sports, nature, pop music, biological processes, corruption, the sciences, violence, or any number of new concepts, entertainments or phenomena.

"Please Ma'am, what is AIDS?" "Why can people kiss each other in other countries but not here?" "Why is Sanjay Dutt called a 'troubled boy', when he is so old?" "Why did all the dinosaurs die?" (This after a visit to *Jurassic Park*). "How can that comet cause an explosion half the size of the earth without destroying Jupiter?" "What is NIRODH?" All these and a thousand more questions are prompted by what children have seen or heard in the fast expanding Indian media.

Unfortunately, with the exception of the efforts of a few dedicated educationalists, authors, and publishers, this burgeoning awareness and demand for new information is not being met by Indian book producers. Given the history of children's publishing in India this is not surprising.

Historically, indigenous English language books for children in India have been of poor quality, in terms of production values, language structure, and content in the first decades after Independence, imported books and copies of imported books from such writers as Enid Blyton, A. A. Milne, Richmal Crompton, Dickens, and Austen, were standard fare for the growing child. Noddy and Big Ears, Christopher Robin, The Famous Five, William, and a host of others provided good English, but bizarre and totally inappropriate social references for a whole generation. This literary diet of colonial past was supplemented by indigenous books of varying quality, the majority of which were poor quality, regurgitated, traditional religious and folktales.

Even today these bizzare remnants of colonialism linger on. For lack of relevant alternative, many parents still introduce their children to the books they enjoyed when young. Enid Blyton is still very popular in India, long after she and her writings have fallen in popularity in the UK.

The move away from pre-television literature which has been

inexorable in Europe and America over the last three to four decades, has produced children's books of a structure, style, and content different from those that have gone before. However, with a few notable exceptions, it is still not widely recognised in India that a child brought up on a diet of television and multimedia inputs requires a literature which explains to them these new and different images; and explains them in relationship to their own society and lives.

It is also still not widely recognised that as children watch more television drama, serials, sit coms, and story programmes they are becoming much more sophisticated about plot devices such as flashbacks, dream sequences, and the intercutting of scenes. Also, they are becoming more adept at picking up what's going on without long explanations from an anonymous narrator. Add to this the fact that they are becoming more accustomed to quick fire dialogue, and it is easy to see that they require a literature different in structure, quality, content and style than that which has gone before.

Sadly, with one or two honourable exceptions, Indian English language publications for children which adopt this changed style and content, are usually a copy or rehash of Western stories and characters, (the ubiquitous Walt Disney confections)

Much of the benefits of the media explosion have been lost on educators, and opinion makers, and depressingly, there is much debate about the supposed harmful effects of the electronic media on reading, and 'cultural' values, and little or no debate on the advantages.

It is still to be recognised in India that in many ways television works for and with books, rather than against them. Children see their heroes and heroines on TV and want to read about them. Through TV they are introduced to new environments, new creatures and want to read about them. (As an example, take the motion picture *Jurassic Park*. Millions of different books, both fiction and non-fiction, were sold as the result of that picture. Dinosaurs became the fashion!)

That children in India are watching, and will continue to watch more television than previous generations is beyond doubt. That

television influences awareness, attitudes, perceptions, aspirations, and habits has long been established. It is the duty of all of us, educators publishers, authors, and parents, to provide, and guide the children to literary sources that cater for their developing, new, peceptions and needs.

The challenge for educators in particular is massive. Handicapped as we are by antiquated curricula and examination systems, we have to cope with a lack of literary infrastructure suitable for the children of a modern multi-media society.

At the moment we have the worst of both worlds. We have television images of all manner of things beaming into our homes, without the literature to explain or make relevant these images to our children. What is particularly sad is that even if we transform the literary infrastructure within the next ten years, we will have had a whole generation of school children who have missed out completely on a relevant modern literary education.

We have to build a relevant, modern, responsive, Indian, literary resource for our children. Until we do, while many parents push the irrelevances of our colonial past, our children will fall prey to the merchandisers and continue to seek out Western literature of little educational worth.

*Abha Adams*

# 9

## The World Of Sukumar Ray

Sukanta Chaudhuri

Like all outbreaks of genius, Sukumar Ray's nonsense literature cannot be adequately explained. Of course there are precedents and parallels. Bengali literature boasts a robust and varied tradition of humour, satire and nonsense, from the poetry of Isvarchandra Gupta in the first half of the nineteenth century to the somewhat later prose tales of Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay. In the field of adult literature, its greatest exponent is Rajshekhar Basu or 'Parashuram', who composed not only social satires but at least one unique metaphysical fantasy about spirits and after-life.

Rabindranath Tagore turned out humour and whimsy for children as well as adults, sometimes appealing to both in the same book. His nephew Abanindranath wrote many such works, of which *Buro Angla* is the best known and most substantial. There are also stray gems like *Lal-Kalo*, the delectable epic of the red and black ants by the psychiatrist Girindrashekhar Basu, Rajshekhar's brother.

Of course, many of these works are later than Sukumar's; and ironically, except for Rabindranath and Parashuram, this native tradition may be less familiar to the educated Bengali today than the European influences working upon Sukumar Ray. Indeed, the latter are more conspicuous. Lewis Carroll is clearly a major presence, above all in the comic tale of *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La*. Edward Lear's influence is less specific but none the less real, along with obscurer elements like the once-popular comic strip about the Katzenjammer Kids.

Yet none of this explains Sukumar. He cast these elements into compound with others all his own, and the compounding process remains mysterious in terms of his own creative growth.

Sukumar was born in 1887. A brilliant student of the sciences, he grew up to be a distinguished photographer and printing technologist. He put this talent to use in the family printing and publishing business. Its best-known product by far was the children's magazine *Sandesh*, founded in 1913 by his father Unpendrakishore Raychaudhuri. Upendrakishore was himself a major children's writer, as were Sukumar's sisters Sukhalata (Rao) and Punyalata (Chakrabarti), his cousin Lila Majumdar and his son Satyajit. Lila Majumdar in particular can strike a vein of whimsy akin to Sukumar's own; but broadly speaking, the exceptional appeal that all writers of this family have for children lies in the unforced, richly-loaded simplicity of their prose.

Even this family culture cannot explain Sukumar's mature genius as expressed in *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* and *Abol-Tabol*. Nor is it fully apparent in his own earlier work, though they would have made the reputation of a lesser man. Much of it appeared in the pages of *Sandesh*: school stories centring on the clever-daft Pagla (mad) Dashu; the hilarious updated version of a *Ramayana* episode in *Lakshmaner Shaktishel*; other dramatic sketches like *Abak Jalpan*, where the intricacies of Bengali idiom withhold water from a thirsty man; and the travel journal of Professor Heshoram Hushiar (a take-off of Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger), whose Karakoram expedition unearths a gallery of prehistoric creatures endowed with names like *Hanglatherium* (Bengali *hangla*, greedy) and *Chillanosaurus* (Hindi *chillana*, to shout or scream).

Sukumar also wrote humorous plays for adults. Their spirit blends with that of the Nonsense Club that he set up among his friends and relations, and the more ambitious Monday Club which included many of the leading Bengali intelligentsia of the day. The Monday Club can be said to have brought a creative dimension to the hallowed tasks of dining, picknicking and *adda* — that unique Bengali institution of informed, inventive gossip.

From time to time, of course, these early works and activities do yield promise of the later flowering of Sukumar's genius. The crazy

schoolboy Dashu, who wears trousers to improve his English and fools his friends with a mysterious portmanteau containing nothing at all, would have graced the pages of *Abol-Tabol*. One thinks also of that flawless short story *Drighangchu*: a king wants to probe the cawing of a crow in his court, and is fitly hoaxed by the myth of an awesome 'Drighangchu' who can only be placated by chanting the following hymn:

A green and gold orang-outang,  
Rocks and stones that jolt and bang,  
Trouble-shooters, blotted blobs,  
City centre vacant jobs.

As Satyajit Ray remarked, "It would be hard to find a better example of the pure spirit of nonsense." But at the same time, the story is charged with social and human satire. This unfailing ability to combine sharp sense with the most genial nonsense imbues all Sukumar's creations. *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* is his most sustained exercise in pure fantasy; but its accountant-crow's handbill spoofs the world of commerce and high finance ("We undertake all kinds of accounting work, business and unbusinesslike, wholesale and retail, on scientific principles"); and the trial scene of the climax is a telling satire on the legal process:

"... There's a judge who sits down and goes to sleep." "I haven't gone to sleep at all," protested the Owl. "I've got my eyes shut because there's something the matter with them."

"Yes," said Hiji-Biji-Bij, "I've seen a lot of judges and they'd all got something the matter with their eyes, poor things."

The combination of sense and nonsense is crucial; but obviously, the latter element is the rarer gift by far. It is most apparent in Sukumar's first book of comic verse, *Khai-Khai*. To tell the truth, this is rather an indiscriminating collection. It includes some pieces of serious, even sentimental or moralizing verse. At his finest, Sukumar is totally devoid of moralizing and of talking down to the juvenile reader. This marks him off most clearly from his contemporary children's writers, including such stalwarts as Jogindranath Sarkar.

Some pieces in *Khai-Khai* are renderings of English rhymes and nonsense verse, including an inspired re-working of Lewis Carroll's "You are old, Father William." In this and other pieces, we already note the play with language—the puns, the ingenious verse-forms, the exuberant alliteration and rhymes—that form one major vehicle for the later nonsense writings and is, alas, incommunicable in another language. (The title-poem 'Khai-Khai' turns on the idiomatic uses of Bengali *khaoa*, to eat.)

We also see in this book Sukumar's gift for the ironic situation. Two pieces stand out, both on the discomfiture of bearded patriarchal figures: a gentleman rushes to rescue a goat being teased by some urchins, only to be knocked down by the creature, and a schoolmaster congratulates a studious-seeming boy actually intent on drawing the master in caricature.

This range of skills is brought to perfection in *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* and *Abol-Tabol*. The first appeared in 1922; the second in 1923, nine days after Sukumar's death, though most of the poems had appeared in *Sandesh* and the volume had been designed by the poet himself from his sickbed.

Satyajit Ray has rightly described *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* as a 'Carrollian fantasy', but never was Carroll so creatively exploited. There is a compelling phantasmagoric quality about Sukumar's fiction from the opening moment when a handkerchief turns into a cat. One after another come a talking crow, two old green-bearded men, a curious creature called Hiji-Bij-Bij ('neither man nor monkey, owl nor ghost'), a lecturing goat, a baldpated singer, and finally a whole melee of beasts in a libel suit over a rude song about porcupines. Time, says the crow, is a precious commodity in that wonderland; yet they spin it out endlessly by turning their age downward once they reach forty, so that they never grow old.

What amazes us is the way this dreamlike sequence is mediated through robust, earthy, thoroughly familiar and down-to-earth experiences and idioms, as in Hiji-Bij-Bij's inane stories:

"There was once a man with a most fearful snore," he said. "And one stormy day there came an enormous clap of thunder, and everyone began to thrash him because they thought it was his snore..."



and equally in the bald man's songs:

Ram Bhajan's wife  
Is a creature of Strife:  
Tossin' and pitchin'  
The pots in the kitchen,  
And thumping and sloshing  
The clothes in the washing.

These songs, which may be said to mark the imaginative high-point of *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La*, retain a crisp colloquial tone even at their most unreal:

The moon shines bright, the witches light upon the drumstick tree.  
Where mimbling schools of grubby ghouls go crackle-crunch with glee.  
The banshee swings and shakes her rings because she's feeling slighted:  
She pouts and squeaks through painted cheeks, "I want to be invited."

It's a short step from this to the sublimely grotesque endearments of the spook mother dandling her child in *Abol-Tabol*:

My podgy imp, my dancing chimp, my laughter-lapping fright,  
My charming hunk, my rootling skunk in moonless woods at night,  
My sunshine-thief, my summer's grief, my April shower of rain,  
My sugar-pest, my syrup pressed from crunchy candy-cane. . .

The life of these lines inheres largely in their untranslatable sound-pattern; but the sheer bizarre wonder of the images is compelling, like those conjured up by the old woodtaster or the man who traps shadows to make medicines from:

The soft morning shadows, all damp with the dew,  
The hot frizzled shadows of mid-summer too.  
When eagles and kites on their wanderings go,  
Their swift roving shadows I trap down below.  
I've sampled the shadows of crows and of crakes,  
The damp cloudy shadows that drift on thee lakes. . .

As Buddhadev Bose points out, in what is perhaps the finest criticism of Sukumar's work to date, the nonsense in *Abol-Tabol* can expand into sheer lyricism. The Griffonling who hates laughter finds himself menaced by the universe:

He won't go near the wood  
Because he's understood  
The tipsy breeze Among the trees  
May cheer his solemn mood.

And all the skyey vapours  
Are merely feckless japers:  
They mount the cloud With laughter loud  
In swift celestial capers.

In the concluding poem, written days before his death, Sukumar's fantasy unfolds its full cosmic sweep:

The heart sends out its harbingers  
To greet the moonbeam's messengers.  
The spirits dance in cloudy vaults  
Where elephants turn somersaults  
While flying steeds their wings unfold,  
And naughty boys turn good as gold.

Yet elsewhere the same vein has been worked into the stuff of familiar life. A caterwauling tomcat is moved to appropriately earthy poeticality by the sight of the moon:

At midnight in the eastern sky  
 A half-moon raised its drunken eye.  
 A chord awoke: last night there lay  
 A half-cake on the larder tray.

In a poem which I always take to reflect the spirit of Calcutta life—in our own time even more than Sukumar's—a group of buskers pit their zany song against the frenetic city:

The cars go up and cars go down, the streets are choked with traffic,  
 The people rush on every side, and jolt and press and maffick.  
 They rush around for bedlam bound, are hit by cars and scattered,  
 The sahibs stare and send up prayers as if the whole thing mattered.  
 But we will only strike the beat and sing our merry lay.  
*Diddle-diddle-boom! Derray, derray, derray.*

Rarefied and realistic elements blend everywhere in Sukumar's nonsense menagerie: real creatures like the tomcat or the love-sick owl ("Said the Owl to his mate, "O my peach, /How sweet, I aver, is your screech!"), imaginary ones like the Lug-Headed Loon, the Blighty Cow, the Griffonling and the Pumpkin-Puff. Sukumar's imagination ranges most brilliantly in the demands of this last-named unnerving creature:

*If Pumpkin-Puff Should Roar—*  
 You perch upon a single leg beside the kitchen door.  
 Then whisper Persian verses with an eloquence forlorn,  
 And slink entirely supperless to lie upon the lawn.

The human characters can be arbitrary too, like the denizens of Bombagarh:

Have you heard of the monarch of Bombagarh's orders  
 To fry mango jelly and frame it with borders?  
 And why does his queen wear a pouffe on her head?  
 Or the queen's eldest brother knock nails into bread?

But such whimsy can turn ominous at times. Nonsense veers towards satire in the chamber of Doctor Deadly, who has learnt surgery by cutting up paper models, or in the Land of Shiva, where such crimes as stumbling, sneezing or growing whiskers attract 21-fold penalties. And the satire is all too plain in the verses on an arranged marriage. The bride's father is feted on his chosen son-in-law:

His scholarly accreditations?  
You must admire the young man's patience.  
He tried quite nineteen times to get  
His Junior School Certificate.  
On top of that, he's rather poor:  
The wolf's forever at their door. . . .  
But still, they're of a noble breed:  
The Grand Panjandrum's direct seed!

These glimpses of an unhappier world are transformed in the setting of *Abol-Tabol*; but the transformation brings out all the better the true nature of that world.

Sukumar's comic imagination embraces everything: the universe outside outdoor as well as that important and invisible part inside our heads, the universe we create and dream of — even, at times, the world we have nightmares about. This makes his imaginings — like Lewis Carroll's — totally authentic, applicable to life as we know and live it, even to the frontiers of knowledge unfolding before us. One of the most provocative and controversial studies of Sukumar links his fantasies to the disorienting findings of modern physics. His vision breaks every link and rule of our rational milieu and yet is utterly compelling:

Now did you hear what Sitanath has said he thought he fancied?  
It seems he's been to sniff the sky, and found it rather rancid.  
Of course, the odour goes away if it should rain or sleet:  
For then I've often had a lick and found it fresh and sweet.

As I said before, much of Sukumar's magic is worked through language—the verbal logic where ideas band together because the words for them rhyme or alliterate, where the lilt of the line brings the most disparate objects within its fold. The verbal sophistication of *Abol-Tabol* is amazing; yet it remains utterly simple, with the lucidity of folktales and nursery rhymes, so that children can follow the diction even while they, more than their elders, know that the unrealities and irrationalities Sukumar speaks of make entire sense and entire truth. To the child, the world appears in terms of such fantasies and myths.

Many great Bengali writers wrote for children in that age, creating a viable body of children's literature that could serve as a foundation for more to come. But no one else, not even Rabindranath Tagore, dared to follow quite so far the imaginative transformations of reality achieved by the child's vision.

This book deals with all that is absurd, fantastic and impossible. It is a book presenting the *rasa* of whimsy. It is not meant for those who cannot enjoy that *rasa*.

Maybe he guessed that he would not live to defend his work in person. In any case, he was obviously concerned about the serious import of nonsense, its role in inculcating a fuller, truer, happier view of life.

But to talk about the serious purpose of nonsense is to destroy its spirit, and the spirit of Sukumar. Grown-ups have been talking and writing about Sukumar for a long time now, sometimes in very grown-up ways. But he retains his magic power to turn us all into children: to revel again in the free play of language, in making and unmaking creatures and images from the elements of our fluid experience, in refashioning a world we do not fully understand into one where we reign as kings and creators, purveyors of joy and wisdom.

# 10

## **Children's Libraries in India**

*Surekha Panandiker*

Sweets and stories are two things children enjoy most. And the happiest time of one's childhood is the story time, the time spent listening to a story told by grandmother or grandfather. India with its rich heritage of literature also has the unique oral tradition of story-telling. A child has introduced into the wonderland of fairies, magicians, gods and goddesses by affectionate grand-parents. This tradition not only opened the vast field of literature and books of children but very subtly, imbibed the eternal values of truth, honesty, brotherhood, respect of elders, triumph of good over evil. In other words, it taught children the social customs and morals.

With the emergence of the nuclear family and the advent of printed words, this personal touch so essential for introducing children to literature seem somehow lost. The spread of television has further drifted children away from books and literature. If we wish to save the situation and inculcate the reading habit and promote the book culture, children's libraries headed by enthusiastic and friendly librarians is the answer because a widespread network of children's libraries can reach books to children.

In India, there are four types of children libraries:

1. Children's sections in public libraries,
2. Exclusive children libraries,
3. School libraries and

#### 4. Libraries organized by NGO's or voluntary organizations.

There are 25,000 public libraries for a population of more than 900 millions of India. Out of these, only 500 have children's sections. These sections do not attract children as they should because the rooms are dark and the atmosphere drab. Books are not attractively displayed and are mostly outdated. New books are not purchased as soon as they are published. Due to administrative procedures involved, stocks are not replenished. No child likes to read worn-out books. Librarians too are crotchety and cooperative. Those public libraries which have mobile vans that visit different colonies along with children's books, available to attract children in larger numbers who borrow books.

Another category of public libraries are the ones which are organized by charitable trusts and voluntary organizations like Servants of People Society, Dayal Singh Public Library etc. Some of them have children's sections. But very few children know about them or go there. This is principally because these sections are generally full of religious and moral books with a very few worn-out and outdated topics of genuine children's books. As a result very few children are interested. The armed forces also have a children's sections in their unit's libraries. Here again not much thought and care is given to selection of the books. Private clubs also boast of well-equipped libraries. The situation is not much different from that of the army unit libraries as far as the children sections are concerned.

The first exclusive library for children in India was started by Children's Book Trust in November 1967. Known as Dr. B. C. Roy Children's Library, it was inaugurated by the then the President of India, Dr. Zakir Hussain.

This library has the largest collection of more than 50,000 books on different subjects. Besides fictions, there are plenty of hobby books and How-to-Do series on various subjects of science and technology. Children get a glimpse of the historical and cultural heritage of different countries. In this information age, children make maximum use of this section. Dr. B. C. Roy Library also gets most of the children's magazines published in Hindi, our national language and English. Colourful furniture and walls adorned by the prize winning entries at the international children painting competition make

Dr. B. C. Roy Children's Library charming for children. Children films, cartoons and interesting documentaries shown on the second Saturday of every month is the added attractions of the library. In summer, B. C. Roy's Children's Library is the most comfortable and enjoyable place for children especially in a hot place like ours as it is air-conditioned! They also have special programmes like storytelling, puppet shows, magic shows, quiz programmes, arts and crafts competitions and children can try their hand even in cookery and traditional floor designs.

There is a unique library for children in Bhopal. Eight students who loved books and could not get them easily came together and decided to start a library. Dr. A. V. Baliga Institute of Russian Studies allowed them to use one room for their library. With donations from well-wishers, books were purchased and a library was started on 1st January 1978. To begin with, there were 20 members paying one rupee per month and a security of Rs. 3. The admission fees were kept at Rs. 2. Within three years, 2500 books were acquired. Membership also increased and on any given day, 250 books are issued to the young readers. The library is naturally closed during examination time, as the young organizers too have to study! Seeing the dedication and enthusiasm of the children, the State Government gave a grant and promised a piece of land for the library. The University of Bhopal also joined in and made a financial contribution for the furniture.

Though the children welcomed the financial assistance, they accepted it only on the condition that there would be no interference from the grown-ups and the donors in the management of the library. The entire management of the library is done by children in the age group of 8 to 18 years. Children volunteers undertake jobs assigned to them. Cataloguing, indexing, maintenance of register do not pose any problems. Wherever necessary, they seek the guidance of school libraries and other social workers. But this unique library remains only of its kind, a library for the children, of the children and by the children.

Delhi Public Library opened a full-fledged children's library in South Delhi in 1977, at the initiative of then Director of Delhi Public Library. This library was given an attractive look with colourful



furniture and beautiful pictures on walls. It has a good collection of quality books. Children enjoy going to this library. As a result of its success, Delhi Public Library also organized children's libraries in resettlement colonies around Delhi. The members of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children helped in organizing and selecting books for these children's libraries. These libraries formed the important part of the recreation centres for children and were called Shankar's Corners.

Then there are children's libraries which are part of the Bal Bhavans. These children's centres are run by Bal Bhavan Society of India which has branches in all states with headquarters in Delhi. Here children are provided training and opportunities to develop their potentials in arts and crafts. The libraries have a fairly good collection of books and trained librarians. But, as the emphasis is more on creative arts, the motivation for reading and the use of the library is not enough. Only when they need some information regarding their project or training do the children visit the library. As a result, the number of regulars visiting the library is small compared to the total membership of Bal Bhavans.

In India, children between the age group of 4 to 14 years form around 25 per cent of the total population. In other words, we have more than 225 million children who should be attending schools. According to the 1992 Annual Report of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, 129 million children are enrolled in 55 million primary and 14 million middle schools. Regrettably, not even 10 per cent of these schools have libraries.

Schools run by private trusts, which are known as 'public schools', have well-equipped libraries. In other cities, most of the schools, both public as well as government, provide library facilities. Students can borrow one book at a time. Reference books, textbooks as well as books for pleasure reading are all available. Trained librarians are appointed to organize and run these libraries.

In Delhi, some of the good and well-known schools, not only have well-stocked libraries but the school authorities make a special effort to see that their students make maximum use of the libraries. In the one particular school, for instance, apart from the library room, book shelves are strategically placed in the landing places of the stair-

cases, waiting rooms and elsewhere, so that children can browse through books whenever they have a little spare time.

Students of Government schools especially in smaller cities and towns are not as lucky. Many of the Government's schools do not have libraries. Those which have, are always over-crowded. There are not enough books to go around. A single librarian cannot cope with 60 to 70 students within a span of 45 minutes allotted for the library period. Librarians feel reluctant to issue books because often they have to pay from their own personal savings, if the book is lost or damaged by students.

Some innovative school teachers in the private, as well as in some Government schools have organized classroom libraries. The students themselves contribute and collect books for these classroom libraries. Once a week, there is a free time when the class teacher allows the children to select a book of their choice and to read. At the primary school level, children have great respect for the teacher. The teacher's word is almost sacred to them. When a teacher recommends and introduces a book to the children, the children naturally take it. Teachers can therefore play an important part in motivating children to read. In classroom libraries, children themselves, exchange and choose the books.

The National Book Trust Scheme of organizing Reader's Club in schools is also a kind of informal children's libraries. Under the scheme, books worth Rs. 50 are given to a Readers Club and a monthly bulletin, containing interesting reading material is sent to them.

Easy accessibility is therefore, very essential for children. Few public libraries which have children's sections are located at one central place and children have to depend on adults to take them there. In school libraries, the time span allotted is so short that all children do not get attention nor the book they need. Furthermore, the atmosphere is normally formal. Informal atmosphere and friendly persons to guide the children are important ingredients that can attract children to libraries. After considering this background and the necessity for widespread libraries for children, the Association of Writers and Illustrators for children started a novel project of providing home libraries for children. As creators of children's

books, they felt that their efforts have no meaning unless books reach their target, namely, the young readers. Once this idea of home libraries was agreed upon, no efforts were spared to make it a reality. Members who volunteered to run these libraries were identified. An appeal was made to friends, relatives, publishers and all those who love children so that they could donate in cash or in kind. Publishers responded with one set of their publications as a donation and maximum discount on the purchase of their publications. This facility of discount they have continued even today. Members of AWIC also collected book from relatives and friends. Many young readers also donated books to these libraries so that other children can enjoy them. All books are collected at the central office. They are then evaluated by a committee to ensure that no undesirable book gets into the hands of impressionable readers. Once the books are selected they are recorded and accessed. A library kit comprising a bag containing 150 to 200 books, a register to keep the record, handouts, membership forms for young readers, receipt book, a display board and diaries and book marks, is then given to a librarian who has to keep the library open for two hours twice a week. The aim of the library is to cultivate the reading habit in children. As such only a nominal fees of Rs. 2 per month is charged from a child. There is no security or deposit. Even this nominal fees is not charged from the children whose parents cannot afford it. A membership is charged only to inculcate a sense of discipline in the children.

Children are given a small diary as a gift when they join AWIC library. In this library they are asked to write which book they have liked and which they have not. Children are very frank and truthful in their assesment. Their responses give feedback to the author members of the Association. It reveals what kind of books the children prefer and which they do not like. Based on these responses authors can write, while the library orgnizers can form their purchasing lists. The beginning was made on 9th April with 9 libraries there are today 55 libraries, including 27 outside Delhi.

In these neighbourhood libraries, children can walk down by themselves. Children feel important when they are asked to fill the form themselves. They can pick up the book of their choice. Parents are not allowed to interfere in the selection. Children are free to travel

with Gulliver. They can enjoy the thrill of roaming through jungles in India. They can try their hand at solving the mystery of the Stolen Buddha or Kanchipur Jewels. They can identify with heroes of innumerable adventure stories. Then there are evergreen stories from the *Panchatantra*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. They can fly with the Yellow Butterfly or play with Sonali's friend or enjoy the pranks of the mighty Chitku. Many picture books are there to enchant them in these libraries. Apart from books in Hindi and English, libraries outside Delhi are also stocked with books in regional languages.

There is no strict librarian or teacher to supervise them. It is the friendly and smiling "auntie", who guides them when they need any particular book. She is also expected to organize different kinds of activities for children, to maintain their interest in books and to attract them to libraries.

Story-telling has always been the best way to motivate children to read. Authors as well as others tell stories to children at AWIC libraries. The librarians also organize story-telling competitions. Illustrating stories by children gives expression to children's painting talents. Similarly, dramatization of stories chosen by children and enacted by children themselves introduces them to theatre techniques. But quiz competitions are another most popular. Even the tiny tots vie with each other to win the prize.

AWIC has introduced and reached books to more than 20 thousand children through the children's library project. Indeed, these young members come from all strata of society and even from different and farflung hilly and tribal areas. To reach the deprived children of slums, the members of AWIC have tied up with voluntary organizations working in that area. Two of the AWIC's libraries in slums have reached books to children who have never seen a storybook before. One of our libraries is providing books to children whose parents are daily-wage earners and have no educational background.

Wherever there are children we feel a library should follow. Thus in Allahabad, AWIC library is organized in a park. In Delhi, our libraries in farflung residential colonies are the only venues where children can see and read good books.

Seeing the popularity of AWIC libraries, and due to persuasion of

our members, local self-government (the municipal corporation) of Nasik in Maharashtra sponsored five libraries under their scheme of child development. With emphasis on the spread of literacy, AWIC is cooperating with the Delhi Literacy Mission by opening children's libraries in areas where literacy programmes were in full swing. At the school of National Association of Blind, a unique AWIC children's library is catering to visually handicapped children by providing audio books and volunteers to read.

There is tremendous potential for childrens' libraries in India. But there are lot of difficulties and problems which hinder the progress of children libraries. The very size of India, poses a big problem. The lack of good roads and an efficient transport system makes it costly to reach books to remote areas where children need books to read.

India is a multilingual country. Apart from officially recognized 18 languages, there are over a thousand dialects. Children, especially very young ones, need books in their mother tongue. Unfortunately, not enough books are published in Indian languages. According to the Federation of Publishers, India produces about 20,000 titles a year. Children's books among them are only 500, out of which, fifty per cent are published in English, when the children who can read and enjoy books in English constitute barely only 7 per cent. Second, the print run of Indian language books is not more than 3000. Thus, the non-availability of a regular supply of children's books is a major constraint. Further, the majority of children's books which are published are paperbacks or softcovers. There does not seems to be a concept of a library edition. The result is that these softcover books are worn out even before they are read by 10 children.

Replenishing stocks is a time-consuming procedure especially in government-run public libraries. Children lose interest as they do not get regular supply of new books in these libraries. The purchasing policy needs to be more informal and quick. New books should be purchased regularly, almost twice in a year, if not more and should be accessed immediately. Another difficulty faced by children's libraries is non-availability of catalogues of children's books, which can guide librarians in the selection of books.

Along with the good supply of quality books, an enterprising librarian is a must for the success of children's libraries. There are not enough trained librarians to organize and manage children's libraries. In the professional training programme of library science, no instructions are given about organizing and managing a children's library. There is no subject of children literature in their curriculum. Naturally they do not have any idea about children's books. A person who runs a children's library must love children. He must understand them and be able to communicate and motivate them. Children should receive the friendly vibrations from the librarian, then only they are drawn to the person and to libraries.

Parental attitude is another stumbling block in the spread of children's libraries. In urban areas, parents are so obsessed with examinations and performance that they feel that reading books will interfere in the studies of the children. In rural areas, parents feel that reading is a waste of time. They prefer children to work in the fields or the home. But this initial resistance can be countered once parents are convinced as to how reading books helps in improving concentration and increases the general knowledge of the children. Rural parents feel proud when their children after reading books tell them about new ways and modern methods that can improve their lives. But to bring this change about, librarians have to interact with children *and* parents.

Children were asked why they read books? And do they prefer books to TV programmes and films?

"I read books because each one has a different theme while TV programmes are similar or repetitive. Films too have same type of stories, only faces change" said ten-year-old Vicky of Rohini a colony of higher middle class people.

According to Raghu a 7th grade student of Government school "I get more information and knowledge from books, so I read them."

Gopal, a young reader from AWIC library in Seemapuri slums said "We have no TV in our house. TV at the Community Centre hardly ever works. The books from the library give me pleasure".

Alka likes the girl-oriented stories and biographies of brave

women. She borrows them from her well-known school library.

Kamala a student of Government school in Nasik, Maharashtra enjoys coming to AWIC library for two reasons. "There is no library in my school and I can understand books as they are in the language we speak. And I can read them when I have time while TV programmes are too quick and many times, I am busy helping mother and cannot watch them."

We need many more libraries to reach millions of children who are waiting for books. But the beginning has been made. The lamp is lit and the light will spread slowly, but surely.

# 11

## **Comics as a Vehicle of Education and Culture**

**Anant Pai**

In a classroom in Bombay, a teacher asked, "Who can name the signs of the Zodiac?"

No one came forward with an answer. With a view to be helpful, the teacher added, "For example, Taurus the Bull is one such sign."

Immediately the young faces brightened up.

"Donald the Duck", said one child.

"Mickey the Mouse", squealed another.

"Kapish the Monkey", said another.

"Kalia the Crow", said yet another.

The teacher later recounted this as an example of the corrupting influence of comics on young minds. Viewed from a different angle, here was opportunity to make education interesting — by using comics as a vehicle of education.

I was never a comics buff myself, nor had I read many comics till 1967, when I thought of acquainting Indian children with their cultural heritage. I had realized by then that everywhere children (and grown-ups too) learn from what and from whom they like. Certainly a good many loving teacher can make any subject interesting to children. But such teachers are few. Hence, the need to make any presentation as interesting as possible

Children all over the world prick their ears, the moment someone



says, "Once upon a time, long long ago. . ." Stories fascinate so do pictures.

A comic is a series of pictures, telling a story, developing a situation or at least presenting the same character in varied circumstances. The comics medium is an excellent blend of both — story and pictures; and hence the spell-binding effect of comics on children.

It is this realization that led me to first understand this medium and then use it to tell children about the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*; about the great classics — e.g., *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, *Raghu-Vamsham* and *Malavikagnimitram* from Sanskrit; *Silappadikaram* and *Manomaniyam* from Tamil; *Ananda Math* and *Debi Choudhurani* from Bengali; and about the great heroes and heroines of the land to whom the children could look up for inspiration like Akbar and Rana Pratap; Shivaji and Guru Gobind Singh; Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi and Sultana Razia of Delhi; Subhas Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh; and about the men and women that fought for our freedom and died so that we could live with dignity and honour.

The net sales of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series — 436 books so far — have crossed over 78 million copies. "Krishna", the first title in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, which has been rendered into 38 languages of the world, has sold more than a million copies! This is evidence enough that the choice of the medium was the right one.

In the footsteps of *Amar Chitra Katha*, many other series have been launched in the market since early seventies — mostly from Delhi and nearby towns. Calcutta, however, has the distinction of having published the first indigenous comics strip serial (by P.C. Lahiri, who drew under the pen name of Kafikhan for *Amrita Bazar Patrika*) in early thirties and also of having published the first two full-length comic books, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (sponsored by Dunlop India Ltd).

*Adarsh Chitra Katha* and *Gaurav Gatha* which were the first two major series to be published on the footsteps of *Amar Chitra Katha*, were from Delhi. Though they were similar to *Amar Chitra Katha* in content and the style of narration, they could not withstand the competition from *Amar Chitra Katha* as well as the other new entrants in the field.

*Amar Chitra Katha* came to be described as a phenomenon in the press. But among the later entrants—Manoj Comics, Raj Comics, Book Fort and Diamond Comics—the term, “phenomenon” could as well be applied to Diamond Comics, brought out from Delhi, of which more than two million copies are sold every year.

Diamond Comics, even their publishers have admitted, are nowhere near *Amar Chitra Katha* in quality or content, but the strategy of flooding the market with ten titles a month, followed up by aggressive salesmanship and innovative promotional techniques, never tried before in the field of publishing in India, have paid rich dividends to the publishers.

I had restricted promotion to conducting quiz contests on Indian history and culture (over 150 contests have been held so far), one-act play contests, elocution contests, fancy dress competitions, (based on Indian history and mythology) and mask colouring contests.

The publishers of Diamond Comics won over the booksellers by their liberal discounts and won over the children by catering to their need for adventure and the need for facing difficulty and danger. They also introduced comics based on humour.

*Tinkle* published by India Book House Pvt. Ltd., and edited by me since inception (November 1980) is a regular fortnightly for children, which attempts to impart education on varied subjects like science, nature, general knowledge and mathematics entirely through the medium of comics. There are stories of adventure and humour too to cater to the needs of young readers. According to independent surveys, (National Readership Survey, CMS, etc.) the readership of *Tinkle* is more than the combined readership of the next three children's magazines (in English) published from Delhi.

Over the past ten years, I have used the comics medium to teach children the principles of banking and the need to save money in a bank (*Adventures of Shiri*, a project for the Canara Bank), on protein nutrition (*Tarang Triumphs*) on cotton cultivation and coffee cultivation (projects of American Spring and Pressing Works Ltd.) on prevention of cancer (*The Mystery of the Missing Cigarettes*, a project of Goa Cancer Society) and recently a book on nuclear power (*The Power of the Atom* for Nuclear Power Corporation, of the Deptt. of Atomic Energy, Government of India).

Today, if nearly 27 years after UNESCO endorsed the use of comics as a vehicle of communicating cultural values (UNESCO passed a resolution to this effect in 1967), we do not find comics being used in a big way as a vehicle of education, and for communicating cultural values, it is due to the reservations, Indian educationists have about this medium and to some extent, because of the flooding of the market by publishers who have hardly any editorial control over the comics they publish and sell.

Early this month, during a chance meeting with Ms. Lizzie Jacob, Commissioner, Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan, I heard her express the view that reading comics serves as a disincentive to reading good books. She gave expression to the apprehensions, held by many educationists. Since the prejudices against comics are deep-rooted, I would like to discuss them in brief here.

I can quote scores of instances in which children exposed to nothing but my *Amar Chitra Katha* before being admitted to school, doing extremely well in studies. This is because they got a good and interesting introduction to the world of words through these comics and they learnt to love reading.

I recall presenting a copy of *Krishna* to my neighbour's child, Raji (Dr. V. Sunita Balan today). After presenting the copy I had read it out to her once. A few days later when she saw me passing by, she insisted on my visiting her house. She had not even completed four by then. With her little finger on the commentary panels and speech balloons, she "read" the entire story from cover to cover! Of course, she could not read most of the words. When I expressed surprise, her mother provided the explanation:

After my departure, the child had made her mother retell the story half a dozen times everyday and then while going to bed, she would keep the story book below her pillow. She, like many others whose first exposure to learning was only *Amar Chitra Katha*, has done extremely well in her academic career (she is now doing her M.D.)

I have quoted this incident at length to emphasise the view that comics or *chitra kathas*, as I prefer to call them, could be an extremely interesting way of introducing children to the world of words. By the time a child is three it is very familiar with the world of visual images. When words come in the company of visual images, bringing along with them a story, education becomes fun. That is why I feel comics,

produced *with the child in mind*, could serve as anteroom to learning. I have emphasised the words “with the child” for the simple reason that many publishers think that any story presented through the medium of continuity pictures is suitable for children.

This stumbling block in the acceptance of comics by educational authorities could be removed by having a comics code authority in India, as in some Western countries to approve the comics before their publication. I do not suggest that this must have anything to do with the Government. Even when the Government nominates persons to such authority, the purpose of establishing such an authority might not be served, judging from the very poor performance of the Central Board of Film Certification, particularly in recent years. Many of these members belong to the “elite” class who have hardly any roots in the soil of this land.

Many educationists feel that it is unthinkable that comics could be used in classrooms. In February 1978, on behalf of *Amar Chitra Katha*, I had conducted an experiment in the teaching of history, in which 961 students from 30 schools of Delhi had participated. The method used was self-study.

*Amar Chitra Kathas* on historical themes were given to the participants in the experiment to read for 40 minutes. Immediately after this their comprehension was tested by objective type questions and this was followed by a discussion with their teacher, who assessed their performance. A majority of the students scored very good marks. The following two remarks of the teachers sum up their opinion:

The students might not have secured such high marks if taught through the usual method.

The students were engrossed in the book. . . They seemed to enjoy the experiment and were unanimous in their opinion that they can learn their lessons better this way than by the conventional method of learning.

Shri Baldev Mahajan, then acting commissioner, Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan gave his reaction in writing in the following words: “I believe that the new form of *Chitra Katha* has immense possibilities and this form can be a very important instrument of

education. In any case, *chitra katha* can be most profitably utilised to inculcate reading habits among children."

Dr. Pratap Chandra Chunder, then Minister of Education, impressed by the data, agreed to inaugurate the Seminar on the Role of Comics in School Education (February 14, 1978).

A number of psychologists and educationists, after in-depth studies have come to the conclusion that "excessive comic book reading is a symptom of maladjustment, but rarely, if ever, the cause of maladjustment." But a study conducted by social scientists of Oxford University (1967) had revealed that readers, particularly young people tend to acquire prejudiced stereotypes by regularly reading episodes of certain comic characters (like Archie). This is, however, equally true about youngsters acquiring prejudiced stereotypes by seeing movies of only Amitabh Bachchan or Rekha. Aping is a sign of lack of self-esteem. Life must be made meaningful to young people so that they do not spend their time in aping heroes of the silver screen or the comic book.

### REPORT OF THE TEACHER EXPERIMENTERS

A proforma of the report sheet is given below. The teachers' assessment of the effectiveness of the use of *chitra katha* in teaching history is shown in figure two.

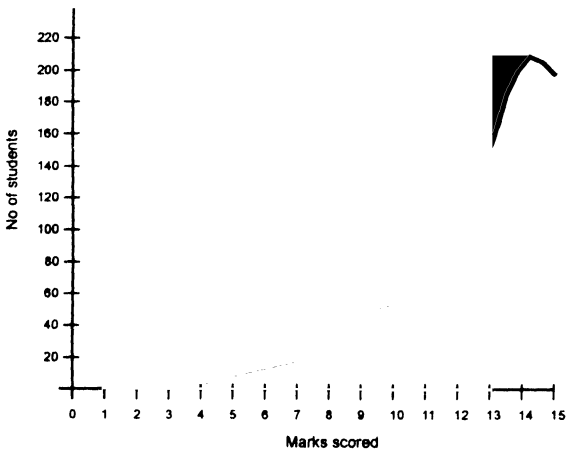


Figure 1 shows the marks (maximum marks : 15) secured by the students.

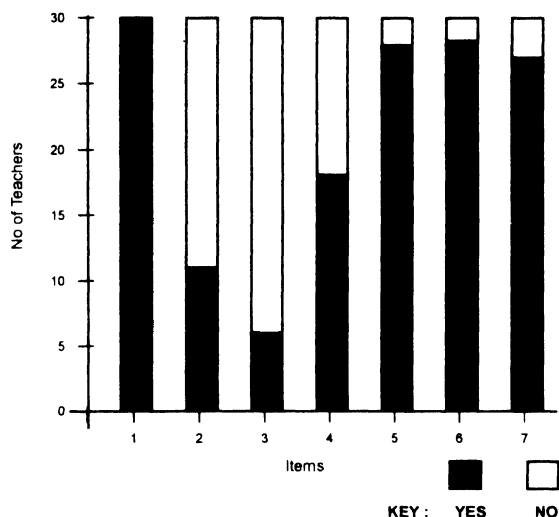


Figure 2 shows the reponses of the teachers to the queries.

#### ITEMS

1. Did the children enjoy reading the book?
2. Were they worried about the test while reading?
3. Did they have any difficulty in understanding the *chitra katha*?
4. Did they approach you for an explanation of any word or phrase used in the book?
5. Are you happy with their performance in the test?
6. Do you wish to try this method in teaching other topics?
7. Do you wish to use various *chitra kathas* as aid in teaching history?

Many consider comics alien to our culture. The *chitra katha* or narrating a story through pictures is not at all new to this land. What is new in the modern-day comics are the speech balloons.

At Ajanta caves we have stories from the *Jatakas* depicted in continuous wall paintings. We have incidents from the *Jatakas* and the life of Buddha, carved in stone in the *stupas* at Bharhut, and Sanchi, and at Amaravati in Maharashtra. At Elephanta Caves too scenes from mythology are shown depicted in stone. These could be considered as precursors of the modern *chitra katha*. The earliest reference to *chitra katha* so far known is that from Patanjali's *Mahabhashya* (c. 140 B.C.) The text literally translated reads: In the

pictures themselves men see the blows rained down on Kamsa and how he is dragged about. At Ajanta, many paintings have short captions or verses relating to the painted themes. Illustrated manuscripts like Kalakacharya Kathanaka depict something very similar to modern *chitra katha*.

At Kalahasti on the *kalamkari* cloth, episodes from the *Ramayana* have been painted with brief captions in Telugu below them. Pabupats of Rajasthan, Jaranpats of Eastern India are examples of continuity pictures (without speech balloons though).

Not many are aware that the massive publishing programme, under which nearly 150 titles on history have been published in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, is unparalleled in the whole world, though the lead came only from the West, particularly the U.S.A.

True, *Archie Comics* and *Dennis the Menace* have explained pollution. Uncle Scrooge comic has tried to explain banking. Superman has dealt on the Black problem of the U.S.A. The U.S. Atomic Energy Committee has used the comics medium to describe the structure of the atom and what happens when it is split. The General Electric Corporation, U.S.A., has brought out a number of booklets on electricity and other scientific subjects and some on historical subjects. The U.S. Deptt. of Health has used *Archie Comics* to dissuade people from drinking. "Hooked" is another comic produced by the U.S. Government in its drive against narcotics. The history of France has been told in brief in the comics form (edited by Larousse). UNESCO and FAO too have used comics as an effective medium to communicate with the young in particular.

Yet the fact remains that such a massive publishing programme as that undertaken in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series on historical titles is unparalleled and it must be remembered, much of this was achieved in spite of the prejudices against comics.

I hasten to add that Indian Council for Cultural Relations has been in the forefront of those willing to recognize the importance of comics as a vehicle of communicating culture. Many *Amar Chitra Katha* titles have been rendered into foreign languages, at the instance of ICCR, particularly into French and Spanish.

Since 1985, the increasing popularity of television and video, and the CNN and Star TV channels that are available through the dish

antennae, has affected the boom in the comics market. Among the many children's magazines that ceased publication are leading ones like *Indrajal Comics* and *Parag*, brought out by *The Times of India*, *Balak*, brought out by Pustak Mahal, Patna, *Poompata* brought out by Paico Publications of Ernakulam (it has been revived recently by another publisher). The sales of *Amar Chitra Katha* comics too dipped year after year till finally in 1992, a decision was taken to suspend the publication of new titles and to restrict the reprint programme only to English language editions. The circulation of *Tinkle* dipped from 1,04,000 per issue just 55,000 in 1991. However, since 1992 there has been a continuous rise in the sales of *Tinkle*.



# 12

## **Children's Book Illustrations in India**

*Subir Roy*

Illustrations in a children's book serve as a visual bridge that takes the child into the kingdom of the main story. Illustrations can entertain, educate, create a dream world for the child, build up the mood of the story, open up the aesthetic eyes of the child and provide information clearly and graphically. They are one of the most important elements in a children's book.

Children's books are brought out in some 13 languages in India. This includes English and Hindi.

Earlier there was an attempt by publishers to keep the pricing low, which is not the case any more. A section of the urban reading children, who used to patronize English language books imported from abroad, are reacting positively to comparatively expensive books being produced attractively in the local market.

In India today, a child has access to different varieties of children's literature. From picture books to comics to information oriented books to science fiction to adventure books — all of them are illustrated.

To begin with, we have picture books, which are introduced to the child of the lowest (reading) age group. A child of five years, who is not capable of reading much, is lured by the colourful pictures in a picture book. The story is read out to the child as he tries to discover through the pictures, the excitement of knowing the characters in the

book and their antics. Normally the characters and incidents depicted in the story are familiar to the child, but it could also be a take-off on reality.

A picture book is designed and produced to look more like a toy — with bright colourful pictures laminated covers, and at times you can come across books shaped like a Teddy bear or a Ladybird. Since a picture book depends heavily on the illustrations, the artist's job challenging and he is at his creative best! He can try out different techniques and textures and experiment with colours and forms.

Comics are a hot favourite with children. The most popular among them are the series of mythological tales and Indian classics brought out by India Book House, a Bombay-based publisher. They normally have flat colours, that is, colours without any tonal variations but printed in multi-colour. Apart from these series there are at least a dozen more brought out by different publishers in Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil and some other regional languages. There are some characters developed by these publications, which are gaining popularity among children — Inspector Garud, Kapish, Dabbujee, to name a few. There are some foreign strips, mainly American, distributed by feature syndicates, which are also very popular — Peanuts, Dennis the Manace, and Phantom, for example. The style of illustrations used in the comics is both realistic and comical, depending upon the story. Some of the comic books are marketed like a consumer good with much publicity and fanfare.

Adventure books and science fiction for teenagers, written in English as well as in Indian languages, have a growing market in India. Enid Blyton is a strong influence as far as adventure stories are concerned. The illustrations in these books are in black and white, with primarily urban characters. In fact, the choice of situations, the usage of dark and light shades, the characters themselves, their clothes, to some extent the composition of the picture and so on, have been influenced by illustrations seen in the international publications.

Illustrations used in the science fiction books have also become very slick of late. Artists have become conscious about details, for example, the aerodynamic shape which a fictitious spaceship would have, or the imaginative rendering when creating the landscape of

a planet with life, some billions of lightyears away from Earth, or developing the features of an extra-terrestrial, friendly or otherwise. There are, unfortunately in India, few science fiction books published every year and fewer illustrators, who are keenly interested in science fiction illustrations and can do justice to the story. Most of these books are again in black and white — with line or halftone drawings, and a multi-colour cover design.

Another variety of books which has got a growing demand in the Indian market are information books. While abroad there are a whole series of books on various subjects like transport and communication, crafts, machines, animals, and so on, in India regrettably there are very few which are meant especially for children. Parents, therefore, prefer foreign books but then, there are subjects which are typically Indian, for which there are hardly any books available in the market, for example, forts or monuments of India, different types of traditional houses that people live in, fruits, trees and flowers from different parts of the land.

The Children's Book Trust has made a beginning by introducing a series called 'How It Works' which covers various aspects from invention to functioning of the aeroplane, the motor car, the television, the ship, the clock, and the train. The information of these things is given in the Indian perspective. These series have become very popular, but then there are lot of other areas, which need to be brought out for the children in an attractive and well illustrated format.

Unfortunately, there are no expert illustrators available in India, for these kind of books who can partially share the responsibility of the research work that is involved to produce the appropriate technical illustrations. A certain kind of imagination and creativity is also necessary to design and produce such books. This particular area of children's books has remained neglected so far. Also, for the same reason, there is a dearth of illustrators specializing in illustrations for science encyclopaedias, books on marine life, natural history and so on.

India has a long tradition of illustrated manuscripts, especially illustrated religious scriptures. However, the genre of graphic art came into being here much later than it did in the west. One of the

reasons is that the art of illustration depends heavily on the technology of printing which came to India much after it came to the West. A printed illustration, unlike a painting or a sculpture, is the reproduced version of the art which the readers eventually get to see. There is also a commercial angle to it. The cost of good paper, scanning in case of multi-colour illustrations, the efficiency of the printing press, and the buying capacity of the reader also affect the illustrations. A book printed by a good press, on good paper with well-scanned illustrations would cause the book to be priced high and might, therefore, put it beyond the buying capacity of the average reader for whom it is essentially meant.

Some of the leading publishing houses in the country have their own designing studios. Most, however, depend on freelancers for illustrations. This dependence on freelancers has the advantage of getting a variety of styles and techniques to suit different projects.

How is illustration work handled?

Once a manuscript is accepted by the publisher, a suitable illustrator is approached based on the requirement of the story. Some illustrators may be good at drawing human figures while others may handle a humorous story well, yet another artist may be capable of sensitive drawings in colour. The illustrator is then briefed on the manuscript. After going through it himself, he prepares a set of prototype drawings, developing the characters, paying attention to their right age, clothes, appearance, the background against which the story is set, the natural surroundings, the architecture, and so on. In consultation with the editorial staff, these prototypes are finalized. Sometimes, especially in the case of picture books, the illustrator builds up the characters himself and gives them an identity, developing a background to suit the storyline.

At times there are stories, which have a typical background depicting a certain region or a particular community of the country. Before preparing the illustrations, the artist has to do some research work to show the characteristic features of that place, and its people, for example, the way the *sari* or *dhoti* is worn, the way the turban is tied and distinguishing landmarks of the place. The artist, in most cases, depends on the manuscript for the details of his illustrations.

There is no such agency in India like an illustration bank, as for

there are in some developed countries, where illustrations are syndicated and sold to different publishing houses. The illustrations in children's books are not changed for different regions because of the common synthesizing culture that binds the different parts of India. Further, it would prove to be excessively expensive. At most, the names can be changed to make it more acceptable to some region. But then, that concerns only the text.

The World Health Organization had brought out an 'Adaptation Kit for Stories of Adventure' sometime back, for changing the illustrations to suit different regions, but how successful it is, yet to be known.

Till recently, India did not have full-fledged institutions, where one could learn the techniques of illustration. But a lot of importance is being given to illustration lately. The National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, runs a course on illustrations. Government art institutions have courses on illustration at the post-graduation level. The Children's Book Trust has also started a full-fledged course on book illustration. There are more and more workshops, seminars, competitions, and exhibitions of children's books illustrations and exhibitions which shows an increased consciousness of their importance.

The Children's Book Trust has conducted a few workshops in the past, involving illustrators from different areas of graphic art — professionals as well as, students from art institutions. The eminent British illustrator Charles Keeping, was invited as the resource person in one of these workshops. Apart from CBT, the National Book Trust, a government agency, has also conducted workshops for children's book illustrators from time to time, and has produced books as a result of these workshops. Another voluntary body, the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children, an offshoot of Children's Book Trust, has taken the initiative in organizing exhibitions of the works of contemporary Indian illustrators, in India and abroad.

As far as awards and competitions are concerned, many things need to be done. It is CBT again, which tried to institute an annual award for the best unpublished illustrations in a competition named after its eminent founder, Shankar. The competition and an exhibition with the selected entries, ran a couple of times, but had to be

discontinued thereafter because of the non-availability of outstanding entries.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is a government agency that gives awards to books published in different languages every year. Recently they have introduced a category for illustrators.

But none of these awards are considered prestigious by the illustrators themselves. They are, to some extent, low key affairs as they are not much publicised. India does not have any international award, even though its illustrators have been participating and winning important international awards in Japan (Noma Concours), Bratislava (BIB), USA (Jack Ezra Keats Award) and other parts of the world. Some of the artists have illustrated books for major foreign publishers as well.

Illustrating exclusively for children's books is yet to be a very prosperous career. Artists working in other areas for instance — advertising, newspapers, teaching or the electronic media often take up assignments, on a freelance basis. Even though the remuneration offered for illustrating children's books is better than what it used to be some years back, it is yet to match the best in the advertising industry, for example.

But there is definitely cause for hope. With the expanding children's book market, with the availability of latest technology in printing and the growing consciousness among publishers and illustrators for quality children's books, there is bound to be a lot of improvement in the children's book illustrations in future.

And Indian children's book illustrations would be able to compete with the best from anywhere in the world.

# 13

## **The Story of Stories of Adventure: Literature for Rural Children**

*Indi Rana*

The understanding of childhood as a distinct phase in human development, its special needs, its importance as the foundation of adult life, is only about 200 years old in the West. Educators have charted a clear evolution of the awareness of childhood from the barbaric treatment of children in European history through the revelations of Sigmund Freud, to the enlightened awareness of the needs of childhood today.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of children's literature as a necessary factor in the creation of balanced adults has been thoroughly explored. There are vibrant cultures of children's literature in Europe, the US, Australia and New Zealand.

### I

The phases of childhood and adolescence are a process of individuation—of seeing oneself as a clear, separate entity, unshadowed, or at least minimally shadowed, by parents, peer and society. Individuation is necessary to create healthy, responsible, balanced adults, capable of networking with each other in the many complex levels and facets of life.

societies can be measured on a scale of individuation: at one end on the continuum is fusion: people of stone age cultures cannot perceive themselves apart from the group; on the other end is individualism: Californians jumping off the San Francisco Bridge. In between are the phenomena of sati, the suicides of Egyptian and Chinese retainers of Emperors on the death of the Lord, kamikazi and yakuza, are examples of non-individuation: when an individual's identity is shadowed by culture, the latter can require the death of the individual, who will acquiesce as a large part of his/her identity is lost to him/herself.<sup>2</sup>

The appropriate *degree* of individuation is necessary for creating mature adults.

Individuation is also necessary for democratic minds, and for professionalism. Non-individuated people will be feudal, not democratic. Non-individuated people cannot make responsible professional decisions—they are sycophantic, they pass the buck upward. The bemusement of 'developing countries' with 'the west' or 'developed countries' may superficially be related to material progress—but can be seen at deeper levels as the attraction more individuated cultures have for the less.

## II

Stories are the most powerful tool in the process of individuation. No man at any age can resist a good story; it is the most digestible vehicle for learning; and learning, like food, air, shelter, clothing, education and love, is as much a biological as a psychological need. Without learning, as with all other needs, the human organism falls

Stories are especially powerful in childhood.<sup>3</sup> Children have clearer perceptions, more honesty, than do adults. Their nervous systems are more tender, they are more impressionable. Their imaginations, yet undamaged by justifying minds, are more complete. But they have not the words to express themselves. A good story gives words to the child's experience. Stories can release hidden dysfunctions—they can mould behaviour. They instruct. They explain reality, they provide role models, they chart possibilities and hori-



zons. They give meaning, they illuminate deep structures, they carry forward the memories of the race.

### III

Perceptions of childhood in our culture are lost in the decontextualized education of those raised in the backwash of the British Raj. Amongst those raised in impoverished local educational systems, perceptions are muddled in misconceptions of the deep meanings in our own heritage, the clear links to which have been lost in a history of cultural dislocations.

Our traditions have not, perhaps, treated children barbarically, but we have not either attained (but for the writing of a very few psychologists)<sup>4</sup> any enlightenment on childhood. We do not understand childhood or children's literature rooted in psychology, as it is understood in Western culture. We have little understanding of the power of our own heritage of myth, legend and educational systems.

The story of Ganesh, the elephant headed son of Shiva and Parvati makes a good example. His human head was cut off by an enraged Shiva (stories differ as to why), who later, in remorse, placed on the body of his son, the head of an elephant. Ganesh is the symbol of filial piety. Of learning and wisdom. His *vahan* is a rat, who in turn symbolizes that to attain wisdom one need not go further than the four walls of the house. Ganesh is a household god. A lovable, tubby, scholarly fellow.

The popular interpretation of the Ganesh myth is that children should respect and obey their parents, no matter what they do; this is the way to wisdom and learning. This is a *societally decreed* interpretation, probably originating from the time brahmins twisted the context of education from conceptual and learner centred, to the rote memorization and teacher centred system we follow today, with no space for individual, voluntary, thought, feeling or choice.

The deeper meanings are more subtle: one interpretation is that the elephant head symbolizes the syntheses of Aryan with pre-Aryan cultures. The other is more in line with current psychological thinking: Certainly the sins of fathers are visited upon the sons, but it is in *digesting* and *transcending* these sins, that wisdom is attained. Not in mere obedience and acquiescence.<sup>5</sup>

The process of digestion and transcendence is the process of individuation. Where the adolescent, having rejected the pain handed down to him, comes to terms with his parents, sees them, not as the giants of his childhood, but as people like himself, and returns to the four walls of the house *voluntarily*. With choice. With true wisdom. With individuation.

Since the deeper meanings of our traditions are lost, there is in our culture, a sentimental swill about childhood, an overindulgence of children for the first few years, followed by a rigid, unconsidered socialization for traditionally delineated roles.

The power of stories, therefore is misunderstood—children grow up largely impoverished in myth, magic and the deeper meanings and structures of life.

I take my mother as example—many will recognize in her, their own: middle class, educated in local schools and Government College Lahore, aspiring in her youth to the social niceties of the British, yet burning her French chiffons for Gandhiji.

“All I remember of my childhood”, she says, “is a lot of affection amongst us brothers and sisters. Of course we fought, and were punished. That’s natural. No one thought about all this new fangled psychology you go on about; we just muddled along and grew up. and we’re all right, aren’t we ? Stories ? Well, our mother told us some when she had time. We read some in school. What more do you need ?” Then she sighs: “My poor mother, what a sad life she had!”

She has, of course, no vocabulary to express herself further, or to trace the cause-effect of personality disorders and family damages in a largely non-individuated society.

She would be astonished to hear about. The Centre for Family Therapy’ for instance, in California. Or the term: ‘The power of stories’, used by Western educationists.

But then, so would most people brought up in India, however finely educated they are to be intellectual giants.

The understanding of childhood is rooted in emotion. Education in emotions in the home is generally limited to ‘muddling through’, and is, in our educational systems, non-existent.

In a culture that does not recognize childhood then, can educators be expected to see the phenomenon of childhood as more than

merely an intellectual exercise? Can authors be expected to write stories for children that are not either clones of Western children's literature, or tales of morality from misconceptualized local cultures?

What little children's literature there is in India is meant for the urban classes. The industrial culture. The buyers.

There are british imports—the kind I read—that give us an escape from our own realities into the magic forests of the European mind. 'The Faraway Tree', 'Noddy and Big Ears' under the age of seven. Adventure stories from eight on: 'The Famous Five', 'The Secret Seven' and so on that do start us on a process of individuation—toward a Eurocentric reality. Creating personality and cultural dysfunctions that most convent and public school graduates who control Indian education and culture have not yet quite dealt with.

Recently Indian authors have begun writing for Indian children. They are producing clones of British children's literature of the kind outlined above. This kind of literature is much frowned upon by the British themselves, they have moved forward to more subtle and psychologically accurate works. But we in India have not even begun to assess new thinking in children's literature in the West; we continue blindly in ruts we have developed thoughtlessly, unaware of the links to our own roots.

Then there are moral tales from our own misunderstood traditions. Were our traditions better evaluated, we would perhaps come up with reinterpretations, as in the Ganesh myth cited above.

#### IV

#### AND WHAT OF THE RURAL?

India has a strong oral tradition, we are told. Stories are handed down the generations. Mythic tales and folk stories are still a rich source for the imagination, for role models, as psychological explanations and religious buffers to existence.

But there has been little real research.

Rural cultures are changing, there is everyday less time for oral instruction. Fewer grandmothers have time to take their children on

their knees. Most grandmothers work for a living—when they are not ailing. As do most children.

Where parents can afford it, children are sent to school. (That they would be better off without the ‘education’ currently imparted is another matter.) There is little time for childhood. Much less for children’s literature.

We in urban India, although we document our folk traditions to obtain degrees, use our craftspeople for our commercial profit, use our folk dancers and theatricists as our badges of culture, know very little, really, nor care very much, really, about our rural people.

## V

As was the case with me, until I received, while on a trip to California, a request from WHO, Geneva, asking me to produce ‘a children’s book for rural children’. A black and white illustrated photocopy of a rough draft accompanied the letter. It was on immunization.

It covered some basic concepts (Fig. 1), and was meant for the

### WHO CONCEPTS COVERED

1. Edward Jenner discovered vaccines
2. Games both help and harm
3. A cold chain delivery system is necessary
4. There are six immunizable diseases with particular characteristics
5. Children can be concerned about getting their baby siblings immunized
6. A health clinic is a friendly place to visit.

Child-to-child Reading programme: older siblings were to be encouraged to get their baby brothers and sisters immunized. It had, however, several problems, such as the Eurocentric bias that assumed a book for ‘rural children’ would cover all non-urban cultures worldwide; the illustrations were of Africans—and were stereotypes: thick

lips and broad noses, that no self-respecting British or American publisher would allow, for fear of repercussions from the Black community; the brief did not acknowledge traditional systems of medicine.

But then it was only a draft. So what was one to do with it?

When I returned to India, the WHO Regional office in New Delhi suggested I produce a book for 'Indian rural children' (as though there is only one generalized Indian rural culture!) A comic book.

Obviously, it was thought, all children love comic books, now considered by educators to be a legitimate route to reading. A later brief suggested an adaptation kit to take these stories into other world cultures.

Available comics from non-European countries such as Japan, Thailand and Indonesia suggested that not only rural children but also adults were voracious readers of comic books. India had the redoubtable *Amar Chitra Katha* series.

But did that mean *rural* Indian children were reading them? It was tempting to assume they were. But no one really knew.

I was unsure enough to decide that field research in rural India was necessary. So I conducted a pre-production test—surely not the literary route! The purpose of the test would be to:

| PRE-PRODUCTION TEST<br>PROFILE<br>OF LOCALITY |  |
|---|--|
| STATE :                                       | Madhya Pradesh   |
| TOWN :  | Satna, Population<br>150,000 Industries<br>CABLES, CEMENT<br>Market well stocked<br>Railhead. Outlying<br>rural areas. |
| TOWN :  | NAGOD, Population:<br>15,000 Cottage Industry<br>Beedi making  |
| VILLAGES :                                    | KAMTATOLLA<br>JAWAHARNAGAR<br>SALIYYA<br>MAHODI  |

Figure 2

|   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <b>PRE-PRODUCTION TEST<br/>PROFILE<br/>OF SCHOOLS</b> |                                      |
| <b>HINDI MEDIUM</b>                                   |                                      |
| <b>Governments :</b>                                  | 5-Parents' average Income Rs 300 pm  |
| <b>Private :</b>                                      | 2-Parents' average Income Rs 600 pm  |
| <b>ENGLISH MEDIUM</b>                                 |                                      |
| <b>Private:</b>                                       | 1-Parents' average Income Rs 3000 pm |
| <b>PROFILE OF CHILDREN</b>                            |                                      |
| <b>Classes - 4,5, Ages 8-15 Years</b>                 |                                      |
| <b>Boys - 197, Girls - 132</b>                        |                                      |
| <b>Rural - 78, Semi-urban - 187, Urban - 142</b>      |                                      |
| <b>TOTAL SCHOOLS :</b>                                | <b>8</b>                             |
| <b>TOTAL CHILDREN</b>                                 | <b>329</b>                           |

Figure 3

1. Ascertain children's KNOWLEDGE BASE of the subject;
2. To find out their ATTITUDE toward getting their baby siblings immunized;
3. What kind of STORIES children most enjoyed; and
4. Their EXPOSURE to and COMPREHENSION of the visual language of comic books.

One could have injected 'messages' on immunization into 'typical folk stories': of kings and queens, demons and witches, and jugglers and clowns as had some UNICEF puppet stories. But these were of the genre 'moral tales': messages hammered home with a thin veneer of story around them, I felt, would not produce results.

Figure 2 outlines the locality in which the tests were conducted, and Figure 3, the profile of schools and children.

The process of testing was a most valuable experience for me with my experience in children's book publishing in New York, London and New Delhi, and a confrontation of my urban biases and preconceptions. Finding a common ground, breaking the ice, with rural children squatting on rough stone floors in their tattered clothes,

often in schools with no blackboards, with bored, indifferent or heavy-handed teachers, seemed like an unbridgeable cultural chasm. Until in a flash of inspiration I asked how many of them had seen Amitabh Bachchan films! It worked like a dream. Hands shot up. There were smiles. Excited chatter. The common denominator for all India—a film hero, the *dhishoom dhishoom* variety.

However, *dhishoom dhishoom* stories listed second in their order of story preferences. They were in descending order:

*Mythological: Ramayana, Mahabharata* etc.

*Dhishoom Dhishoom: Amitabh Bachchan films, policemen and thieves, phantom.*

After this their recognition and appreciation of stories came from their school texts, validating my mothers remarks:

*Historical: Rana Pratap, Jhansi Ki Rani.*

*Animal Stories: Panchatantra* tales.

*Magic Tales: Needle and Thread and Sewing Machine, Mandrake.*

*Fairy Tales: The five Sayings.*

And of the following categories the experience of rural and semi-urban children who did not have access television, was NIL:

*Family Stories*

*Children's Modern Adventure and Initiative*

Quite clearly, rural children were not being taught to question the family, or to be self-reliant. Individuated. Our culture was not giving children role models that would enable them to think for themselves. For it is from stories showing them taking the initiative, battling 'bad' adults, that children from 8-14 begin to individuate—on the road to adolescence, at which time they come in conflict with parents (those giants of childhood), whom they must transcend to attain the joys of adulthood.

Rural children were more aware of immunization concepts than urban, demonstrating that Government Health initiatives aimed at rural areas were working. And the majority were unaware they could be responsible for immunizing baby siblings.

Figure 4 sets out the exposure of children to comic books. Despite the fact that all children attended the same markets, rural children were only marginally familiar with comics. Those who were, were reading simple comic pages in children's magazines: surprisingly,

Hindi versions of O Henry. Urban children were reading *Amar Chitra Katha*, *Mandrake*, *Phantom* and more.

| PRE-PRODUCTION TEST<br>EXPOSURE TO<br>COMIC BOOKS |     |
|---|-----|
| Rural children .....                              | 15% |
| Semi-urban children .....                         | 0%  |
| Rural cum-semi-urban .....                        | 7%  |
| Urban .....                                       | 95% |
| SCHOOL CATEGORIES                                 |     |
| 1000% urban children .....                        | 3   |
| 100% semi-urban children .....                    | 2   |
| 100% rural children .....                         | 2   |
| Mixed : 60% semi-urban .....                      |     |
| 40% rural .....                                   | 1   |
| TOTAL .....                                       | 8   |

Figure 4

So much for producing a comic book for rural children!

The comprehension of the visual language of comics amongst rural and semi-urban children was therefore practically nil: box separations needed explanation; bubbles were not associated with speech; insets were not understood at all; in perspective drawings entailing dramatic changes of position, the same person was not recognized from frame to frame.

And when shown a comic page and straight text together and asked which they rather read, the straight text was preferred!

## VI

However, the editor at WHO, New Delhi believed that as children learn fast, a comic book would still be viable. I suggested a 'picture book' with simple visuals and parallel text and conceived 4 stories based on story preferences, showing children taking the initiative despite their conditioning, and empowering girls.

The title of the book was to be *stories of adventure*, as this I believed would make the publication palatable to the age group and encourage initiative. The stories were: *The Curse of Narbhakshi Rakshasa*: Mythical. A generalized central Indian context.

A wandering boy minstrel and his father come upon a village held in fearful thrall by a horrible demon living in the jungle. Every time the demon rampages through the village, children fall sick and die.



Symptoms of TB without mentioning the disease are narrated—the boy realizes it is TB. The father tells him he was inoculated by his now dead mother, when he was a child. The minstrels plan a strategy to rid the jungle of this menace. They set off with a hatchet and a box of matches.

They come upon the demon snorting and burbling in his sleep in a filthy cave—bones, flies, garbage all around. They collect the garbage and set fire to it. Waking, the demon leaps on them shouting “Ahhh! Food! Come to me by itself!” But falls back with a massive headache, wailing: “Oh my yummy bones, why are you destroying my yummy bones!”

The boy lectures him: “You filthy beast. Did your mother teach you nothing?” The demon, like all bullies is cowed, and agrees to go to the PHC. The next morning, he is carted away in a cart made by the villagers, who then go into his lair, clean it up and plant flowers.

The demon ends his days ploughing fields for the village people. The minstrel boy and his father go on their way.

## VII

*The flood.*<sup>7</sup> Natural Disaster. Eastern India. In a happy village family, a young boy has a magic talking parrot who tells him of his adventures in the city. The boy longs to go there.

One night there is a flood. The village is washed away. The boy and parrot save the baby. They are rescued by army jawans and are put in a refugee camp. The boy sends the parrot out everyday to look for his parents. An old woman who has lost everything looks after the baby.

One day malaria breaks out. The boy hears about the injection. He gets his baby brother immunized at the makeshift dispensary in the camp.

Sad days follow. But eventually the parrot finds the parents.

Happy reunion. The father is pleased that the boy has shown initiative in immunizing his brother. They offer the old woman a home. Happy to make a home again in their village.

## VIII

*There Came a Horseman.* Historical mystery. North Indian, Islamic. The children of a PHC nurse are playing cricket when a strange, woebegone man on a horse wanders up. He is finely dressed from a time past.

He tells them he is the court doctor of the Emperor. The emperor's babies have been dying of mysterious diseases, and so have his wives. The Emperor has married a third time and again the child is sick. If the doctor does not find a cure he will be beheaded.

The children, listening to the symptoms realize the babies have died of diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus. They are amazed that there is an Emperor somewhere in this day and age, but they fetch the PHC injection kit and ride out with the horseman. He takes them through an opening in the rocky mountains in the distance—and they are in a kingdom lost in time!

The Emperor does not believe in this magic, but this is the last resort. The children immunize all the babies of the kingdom; stressing booster shots. They are given a feast and taken back home. They leave booster shots and admonitions.

They turn to look back at the rocky mountains. No entrance is visible. Was it a dream?

## IX

*Missing Gold.* Cops and Robbers. South India. A young girl on crutches from polio is lonely watching other children play. Resting on the verandah of a house on the way home from school on a hot dusty day, she overhears men plan to steal medicines. The truck is to be loaded at night at the ruined temple outside the town.

She tries to get her father to go to the police, but he thinks she is being fanciful. She sends a friend who is not allowed into the police station. So she goes herself and waits until she is allowed in to see the Inspector who, impressed with her determination, says he will do what he can.

That night unable to sleep, she hobbles out to the ruined temple, and is able to delay the thieves by tripping them up with her crutches, until the police arrive.

| CONCEPT   | Rakshasa | The Flood | Horseman | Missing Gold | Covers |
|---|----------|-----------|----------|--------------|--------|
| TRADITIONAL MEDICINES MAY HAVE ANSWERS                          |          |           |          |              | +      |
| SUPERSTITIONS ARE HARMFUL                                       | +        |           | +        | +            |        |
| GERMS BOTH HELP /AND HARM                                       |          |           |          |              | +      |
| VACCINATION CREATES DEFENDERS IN BODY                           |          |           | +        | +            | +      |
| NON-VACCINATION CAUSES DEATH/ DISABILITY                        | +        | +         | +        | +            |        |
| REPEAT DOSES ARE NECESSARY                                      |          |           | +        | +            |        |
| A LITTLE SICKNESS AFTER VACCINATION IS BETTER THAN INFECTION    |          |           | +        |              | +      |
| OTHER DISEASES CAN BE VACCINATED AGAINST                        | +        | +         | +        | +            |        |
| VACCINES MUST BE REFERIGERATED                                  |          |           | +        | +            |        |
| CHILDREN CAN BE RESPONSIBLE FOR GETTING BABY SIBLINGS IMMUNIZED | +        | +         | +        | +            |        |
| CHILDREN CAN BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CLEANLINESS       | +        |           |          |              |        |
| HEALTH CLINICS ARE FRIENDLY PLACES                              |          | +         | +        | +            |        |
| HEALTH PERSONNEL ARE GOOD PEOPLE                                | +        | +         | +        | +            |        |
| CHILDREN CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE                                  | +        | +         | +        | +            |        |

Figure 5

The next day she is the school heroine. Vaccines are gold.

X

Concepts and elements used in the stories were rigorously analyzed to insure all that could be included were, and that which was not, were left out consciously and with deliberation. Figure 5 outlines the concepts, and Figure 6 the elements.

| ELEMENTS               | Rakshasa | The Flood | Horseman | Missing Gold | Covers |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|--------------|--------|
| RURAL ENVIRONMENT      | +        | +         |          |              |        |
| SEMI-URBAN ENVIRONMENT |          |           | +        | +            |        |
| LOWER INCOME HEROES    | +        | +         |          | +            |        |
| MIDDLE INCOME HEROES   |          |           | +        |              |        |
| FAMILY INVOLVEMENT     | +        | +         | +        | +            |        |
| MYTH/LEGEND            | +        |           |          |              |        |
| HISTORY                |          |           | +        |              |        |
| COPS AND ROBBERS       |          |           |          | +            |        |
| NATURAL DISASTER       |          | +         |          |              |        |
| MAGIC                  | +        | +         | +        |              |        |
| CHILD HEROES           | +        | +         | +        | +            |        |
| GIRL HEROINE           |          |           |          | +            |        |

Figure 6

|   |
|---|
| <p><b>THE ILLUSTRATIONS</b></p> <p><b>UP-MARKET IMAGES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Abstract</li><li>- Unrealistic</li><li>- Require education, horizon</li><li>- Modern/global</li><li>- High ‘threat factor’</li></ul> <p><b>Down-market images</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Realistic</li><li>- Familiar, known</li><li>- Require no stretching of imagination</li><li>- Local</li><li>- Low ‘threat factor’</li></ul> |
|---|

XI

The illustrations (the hunt for the appropriate artist, makes a story in itself and was no easier, I often thought, than the *Hunt for Red October!*) were kept ‘down market’, with no dramatic perspective changes, limited bubbles, parallel text and a modest size and colour. People stood boringly (from the urban point of view) in one place from frame to frame.

Figure 7

| VHAI<br>LOCALITIES |                    |                          |                      |
|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| State:             |                    | Union Territory          |                      |
| City :             |                    | Delhi                    |                      |
| Schools:           |                    |                          |                      |
| — Urban :          |                    | R.K. Puram, Vasant Vihar |                      |
| — Semi-urban       |                    | Nangloi, Najafgarh       |                      |
| — Rural:           |                    | Village Dera             |                      |
| State :            | Madhya Pradesh     | State:                   | Uttar Pradesh        |
| Dist:              | Raigarh            | Dist:                    | Mathura              |
| Town:              | Raigarh            | Town:                    | Vrindavan            |
| Village:           |                    | Village                  | Bajna, Chhatikara,   |
| Town:              | Ambikapur (tribal) |                          | Edalgarhi, Chandpur, |
| Village:           | Kunkuri            |                          | Lalpur               |

Figure 8

| VHAI<br>PROFILE OF SCHOOLS               |                           |
|--|---------------------------|
| <b>HINDI MEDIUM</b>                      |                           |
| Government :                             | 11 Project 11 Private : 6 |
| <b>ENGLISH MEDIUM</b>                    |                           |
| Private :                                | 3                         |
| <b>PROFILE OF CHILDREN</b>               |                           |
| Classes 4/5; Age 8-15 years              |                           |
| Boys - 709; Girls-508                    |                           |
| Rural - 817; Semi-urban-240; urban - 160 |                           |
| TOTAL SCHOOLS : 31                       |                           |
| TOTAL CHILDREN : 1217                    |                           |

Figure 9

Figure 7 sets out the difference between 'up-market' and 'down-market' visuals.

The interim publication was field-tested by the Voluntary Health Association of India on a larger data base, to ascertain *Comprehension*

### VHAI TESTS ADMINISTERED

- |    |                         |  |
|----|-------------------------|--|
| 1. | KNOWLEDGE:              | Written. On subject  |
| 2. | CLOZETEST:              | For comprehension of text. Every sixth word removed from selected passage. Children to fill. |
| 3. | VISUAL TEST:            | Pictures shown without text. Questions asked.  |
| 4. | CLOZETEST WITH VISUALS: | For comprehension<br>AT THE POINT—CHILDREN ARE GIVEN COMPLETE STORIES TO READ                |
| 5. | CODE-SWITCHING          | Message altered in most meaningful para of story. Questions put on altered message.          |
| 6. | CLOZE POST-TEST :       | Same test as in (2) to check increased level to comprehension                                |
| 7. | KNOWLEDGE POST TEST :   | To check increased knowledge base  |

Figure 10

Interestingly, on the written post-test, retention of concepts seem to have actually gone *Down*. But on verbal questioning, it showed up higher! Surely a statement on the efficacy of 'literacy centred' testing techniques, on people living largely in oral cultures which have their own validity.

The overall best results suggested we were on the right track for a comic/picture book for rural children.

The story most appreciated was *Missing Gold*, the child tripping a thief with her crutch; the next was *Narbhakshi Rakshasa*—the demon healthily sowing village fields.

There were minor problems with the vocabulary level, and major problems in visuals: flashback techniques in *There Came A Horseman* were not understood, so it was restructured without flashbacks and renamed *The Unhappy King*, a more direct and simple concept. There were some problems with gestures and positioning of characters. These were corrected and the book published in both Hindi and English, in a small format which I strongly recommended (see below).

of vocabulary and visuals; *Appreciation* of content and form of story telling; and *Retention* of concepts.

The localities are set out in Figure 8, the profiles of schools and children in Figure 9, and the large and impressive battery of tests, outlined in Figure 10.

An adaptation manual was devised (with a great deal of analysis and tedium) for taking the stories and illustrations across cultures. A page was adapted to Bhutanese culture as an example. Adaptation is a subject in itself for which there is no space here.

The Kit includes a 32-page book of four stories in English, the same in Hindi, four 8-page booklets of a single story each, for children to exchange between each other—my personal preference for distribution. The adaptation manual and illustrations in the original size for adaptation artists to trace and adapt to their own cultures.

## XII

*Stories of Adventure*<sup>8</sup> is possibly the only fully field-tested item of children's literature for rural children in India. It is evocative that it comes, not out of either Indian educational or child development establishments, or the Indian publishing world, but out of an international body for health.

Its fate is also evocative: no one has actually known what to do with it. It is reported that copies of the adaptation kit have gone out to all WHO offices worldwide. However there is no feedback, but for one from the Maldives where the *rakshasa* story was 'adapted' but the instructions were not used. The head of the UNICEF Health Department at the time, recognizing the value of the work, wanted it translated/adapted into all major Indian languages and distributed to school children across the country. He ordered 80,000 copies of the 32-page book in Hindi from WHO, in full colour. I strongly recommended colour only on the cover and black and white pages inside, in the 8-page exchangeable form, as to do more would be to 'give them cake where they had no bread'; impoverished parents could well lock away anything that looked too costly—however UNICEF Health preferred distributing cake! UNICEF Education was to take it further. All copies were sent to Patna 'for a field-test'—without a field-testing protocol.

And that was the last anyone has heard of them!

Meanwhile educational material/children's literature produced by the few development projects that do target children and meant ostensibly for rural children, generally use stories, visual language

and vocabulary levels and full colour production which would be more appropriate for urban children.

Field testing, but in the rare case, is at the level of: "The teachers say they like it."

### XIII

Since this work, I have worked further in visual literacy—in cross-cultural communications, documented as *Developing a Pictorial Language: An Experience of Field-testing in Rural Orissa. A Guide for Communicators*,<sup>9</sup> for the Global Safe Water Conference in New Delhi in 1991. The processes and conclusions in this work, take the findings of *Stories of Adventure* further, but it is not possible to outline this work here.

### *References and Further Reading*

1. There are several publications on this subject. One that might interest is: Demause ed., *The History of Childhood: Evolution of Parent-Child Relations as a Factor in History*, London: Souvenir Press Ltd., 1976.
2. A detailing of the concept of individuation can be found in: James Campbell, *Oriental Mythology: The Masks of God*, New York, Arkana, 1991.
3. On the power of stories, many books have been written, Evocative is: Butler, Dorothy. *Babies Need Books*, London, Pelican Books, 1982.
4. The classic is of course: Sudhir Kakkar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981.
5. Reinterpretations of myth are an on-going process. Scholars such as Dr Ramachandra Gandhi, Chaturvedi Badrinath and Dr Sudhir Kakkar have done much in this area. This particular re-interpretation is mine, in line with my own readings in Western child psychology and the mind of India.
6. UNICEF had produced radio stories, which I wanted to use in print, as the same stories in different media reinforce messages. However, most of the UNICEF stories suffered from the usual lack of deep structural thinking characteristic of cultures which place little emphasis on the special needs of childhood (other than material welfare), and were patronizing to children. UNICEF had a story called *Kubda* (hunchback) *Rakshasa*. I was asked to change the name so it would not seem that I was 'plagiarizing' UNICEF originated material, so I wrote a new story. Making fun of hunchbacks, in any event, is insensitive.
7. This is a UNICEF story that worked well, under a different name.
8. The process of testing for, and the production of, *Stories of Adventure* has not been documented, but for what is available in this article. A full documen-



tation would include the process of creating appropriate visuals, and detailing of the Adaptation Kit. Copies of the publication and adaptation kit, however, are available from:

The Programme Officer  
Universal Programme on Immunization  
World Health Organization  
Indraprastha Estate, Ring Road  
New Delhi 110002, India

9. *Developing A Pictorial Language: An Experience of Field-testing in Rural Orissa: A Guide for Communications*. The printed Guide is to be republished in by:

Intermediate Technology Publications  
103-105 Southampton Row  
London WC1, UK

An educational video targetting field educators and communicators on the subject has been funded by DANIDA and professional VHS copies are available from:

Foundations  
B/G-1 Rosewood Apartments  
Mayur Vihar Ph I Ext II  
New Delhi 110091, India.

## **Writing for Children in India in English**

*Poile Sengupta*

It's not easy, though many people, specially in our country, think it is. They probably feel that home, food, friends, school, the big elements in a child's life, patterned into pretty pastel stories using two syllabic words, constitutes writing for children. They probably also think that such writing is best left to those who can dabble in it between chores and for 'time pass', and hence, to women. The result is that we have a whole lot of extremely substandard stuff calling itself 'children literature' and a large number of self-satisfied ladies who throng seminars and workshops spouting formulae and half-learned child psychology.

One of the prominent problems that writers for children have to contend with, is that they are often overwhelmed with a sense of responsibility. Not that those who write for adults don't feel this way too; Yeats did. But when writing for children, one is more conscious of it, as if every word that one writes ought to be weighed with the right values, the right significance. Our national book breeding institutions lay down 'rules'; writers must ensure that the manuscripts they submit uphold the principles of national unity, national and personal integrity, regional and religious tolerance, secularism, international understanding and global harmony! What subsequently emerges from this unholy mixture, is a moral science-cum-civics lesson with a thin anaemic story-line, which our English

reading children shudder away from, to go headlong into books are fun to read.

Fun! Not funny. Not a series of corny jokes, not painful variations of the fat-man-slipping-on-banana-peel scenario. Just fun! It means that a children's writer should feel free to roam in the continents and oceans of the mind and pick up that which is spellbinding, dazzling, serious, grave, lyrical, poetic, precious. The range and depth of a book, its sense of unshackled freedom makes the writing vivid, the book, fun. And strangely enough, this happens, when this sense of freedom is achieved, all tiresome values creep in too, not with bombast but softly, together with lovely colour.

Writing for children necessarily excludes some aspects of human experience. Sex, for instance, and overt, brutal violence. But writers are so concerned with what they should not talk about that they forget that their readers are, in the main, highly perceptive intelligent children who are aware of being surrounded by failing planning posters, talkative, indiscreet relatives, indifferent teachers, bullying classmates, quarrelling parents; none of these unsightly things can be wished away, or concealed under masses of candy words. Even picture books for the very young and for beginning readers need to be strong in style and content. Some of the picture books that I have seen are almost sodden with milk and sugar because the author has contrived so much not to let anything bad get in.

Realism is a difficult word to use, especially in this context. In this case, I am not using the word in terms of literary theory. What concerns me here is this: How much of the real world should we describe and in what detail when writing for children? This is not a trick question. It suggests that the real world is a place full of 'telegrams and anger' (E.M. Forster) and sordidness and greed and sadnesses. It isn't; we all know that. The real world is a place of wonder too; it has gentle, generous people with ideals, hopes and fantasies. Some of my writer friends, however, find it difficult to keep a balance. Most of them play safe and prefer to deal with an exclusive, grossly false and overfed world, a designer world, where excitement and reading pleasure have to be wrested out of the

like haunted castles, Western clothes, doughnuts, pop music, midnight feasts, French teachers and the like. I remember reading a story that tried to be different and 'real' and made much of a group of birthday party wallahs giving *laddoos* to a slum child looking through the gate at the end of the driveway; the driveway is important and you can guess why. I still remember the story's complacency, and yes, I remembered Katherine Mansfield.

So then do we expose, painfully, this side of the real world, blisters, tears and all? Why not? Except that I continue to be haunted by what a monk teacher at the Ramakrishna Mission once asked me. "Why", he wanted to know, "do you want children to be introduced to suffering so early?" Not a question easily answered. Nor easily dismissed. I have to grapple with it every time I start a new piece of writing and it is at such times that I am confronted, brutally, with my Third World (a dirty, ugly term) status. How delightful it would be to write about white, privileged children living in a sun-dappled Washington suburb or in the high mists of Scotland or upsidedown in New Zealand! What superb adventures they could have, with no more suffering than what a toothache could bring or a bit of over-indulgence at a midnight party. How attractive freckles can be and how exciting to go through tunnels that are clean, free of dogshit and urine.

The trouble is that what I have described is not in the realm of fantasy. If it were, it would probably be more acceptable. But we all have a sneaking feeling when we are deep into an Enid Blyton or a Franklin Dixon, that there are children right now who actually do live that kind of lifestyle. The adventure may be make-believe, we accept that, but the houses, the swimming pools, the countryside, the schools? They are real enough, aren't they? And in the gap between what is imagined and that which is merely unattainable, can lie resentment, disappointment, alienation.

Above all, it is this sense of alienation that is the most dangerous. When our national institutions for children hammer on about the need for books on integration and unity, it is this fear that haunts them, the fear that other, more attractive cultures and lifestyles will seduce our children, and leave us with nothing but the last lingering notes of the Pied Piper's melody. If that happens we have nobody to

blame but ourselves, for being stuffy, unrealistic and oh, so pious.

Very few children's book publishers in this country, would understand my tirade. They would probably dismiss it as an elitist complaint. They might even call it menopausal, hysteric because they can feel safe in the assumption that, as I pointed out earlier, there are very few men in India who write for children. I have had to deal with publishers whose ideas about today's children is limited to the cutenesses seen on TV commercials. For most publishers, in any case, children's books are rather like tomatoes, products with a very low shelf life, since children grow alarmingly quickly, and their tastes change. The heads of well-known and well endowed publishing houses politely insist on the manuscript being safe; the safety here, being instant and continuing saleability. So, please writer, please don't go berserk and give us something outlandish with 'high' language and funny ideas, and please give us questions at the end of each chapter; a glossary also, and some vocabulary exercises, so we can market it as a 'supplementary reader, otherwise we won't have any sales.

I have done it too. To earn a living.

I would have to agree with those in the publishing industry that a book, however degrading it sounds, is a product that must needs be marketable. But what I do not understand is this: why in our country is there so little importance given to the sale of children's books as distinct from school texts? Why are no marketing strategies thought of? Why is the product given so little publicity? Why are children's books not even reviewed as a regular feature in our newspapers? Why oh why, are children's writers looked on with indulgence, unless they write 'supplementary readers'? Why am I told that I must make my mark as a writer for adults before my voice as a children's writer is heard? In what way is writing for children less than, or inferior to, writing for adults?

We have all gone through childhood. Some haven't yet left it. But very few remember that part of their lives honestly and objectively or acknowledge its importance in their self-evolvement.

I must confess that it is much easier for me to write for my contemporaries. I can share with them a certain code of language, of experience, of manners, a particular sense of historicity. With chil-

dren, the country is unmapped, the track unfamiliar, even the compass doesn't read right sometimes. What is most alarming is the constant need to ring true, to use the right words at the right time, and to know when not to say anything at all. The silences within a narrative are probably what gives it its quality; they are also the toughest part of the craft of writing. This is true of children's writing as much as it is of writing for adults.

It is only in the last two hundred years or so of this civilization that children have been allowed to remain young. Prior to that, it seems as if there were no children at all, only small sized, inexperienced adults who, often enough, had to be frightened into good behaviour. Our much flaunted *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* tales are really conduct manuals and not meant primarily for children. In fact, there is enough in some of those stories to warrant an 'A' certificate. Elsewhere in the world too, there was very little that could be called children's literature as we know it. Charles Perrault's fairy tales in prose were written in 1696; John Newberry's *Mother Goose* rhymes were written around 1744. And then, we had the Brothers Grimm in the early nineteenth century, after which the deluge of Andersen, Lear, Carroll, Twain, Stevenson. In India, while some regional languages, particularly Bengali, have provided a fair amount of good reading for children over the last century, the emergence of anything resembling a movement in children's writing in English began only about twenty-five years ago. But already, there are enough self-proclaimed gurus and *pundits* who presume that they alone know what should go into the making of a book for children. One such deity has devised her own neat *mantra* to ensure success in this area. According to her, a children's story must have an exciting beginning, a gripping middle and a satisfying climax!

And yet, even the uninitiated writer will realise that there is no surefire method to achieve success, particularly when writing for children. Why are we unable to produce even the Franklin Dixon-Carolyn Keene variety of formula adventure? Maybe it is because we are still self-conscious about writing in English of what are non-English experiences. Instead of adapting the language to our uniqueness, we tend to go wholesale and adopt the lifestyles and attitudes that are implicit in the language. We have to acknowledge, whether

we like it or not, that English has become a part of our inheritance and, for many, their language of creativity. It would be a waste of effort to feel guilty about it whatever state policies might project. But our books must be authentic and they must talk of us, of the way we live and the way we think, not of robin redbreasts and scones for tea. It is time that the English reading world understood that we are capable of producing children's books which, one day, might be internationally accepted as classics and not, as they are now, exhibited as samples of Third World imitations of what others do much better.

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